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電波女と青春男

入間人間

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15th ANNIVERSARY DENGEKIBUNKO

電撃文庫

布団でぐーるぐるな電波女と同居って……

俺の青春は、一体どーなんの？

『嘘つきみーくん』の入間人間が贈る待望の新作登場。

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▶▶▶ 1月の新刊につきましては、オビ折り返しをご覧ください

入間人間（いるまひとま）

まだまだ22歳。酒は飲めない、煙草は吸えない、コーヒーも飲まない。ついでに雨男であり、日光に弱く、空気も読めない。地球には喧嘩腰だが、自分には優しい典型的な人間。そんな自分が結構好きです。

【電撃文庫作品】

嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん 幸せの背景は不幸
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん2 善意の指針は悪意
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん3 死の礎は生
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん4 絆の支柱は欲望
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん5 欲望の主柱は絆
嘘つきみーくんと壊れたまーちゃん6 嘘の価値は真実
電波女と青春男

イラスト：ブリキ

一日（いちじつ）の計は晨（あした）にありをモットーにはや数年、一度も実行出来ておりません（笑）。今回も初の挿絵仕事で、各所に迷惑が掛かっていないかとオドオドしております……。

カバー／暁印刷

電波女と青春男

宇宙人が見守ると噂されるこの町で、俺の青春ポイント獲得ミッション（具体的には女子との甘酸っぱい高校ライフ大作戦）はスタートした。

「地球は狙われている」らしい。同居する布団ぐるぐる電波女・藤和エリオからの引用だ。俺の青春ポイントが低下する要因であり、本ミッションを阻害する根源でもある。

天然癒し系な爽やか健康娘・リュウシさんや、モデルさんもびっくりの長身（コスプレ）少女・前川さんとの青春ポイント急上昇的出会いを経たにもかかわらず、俺の隣にはなぜか布団でぐーるぐるな電波女がいるわけで……。

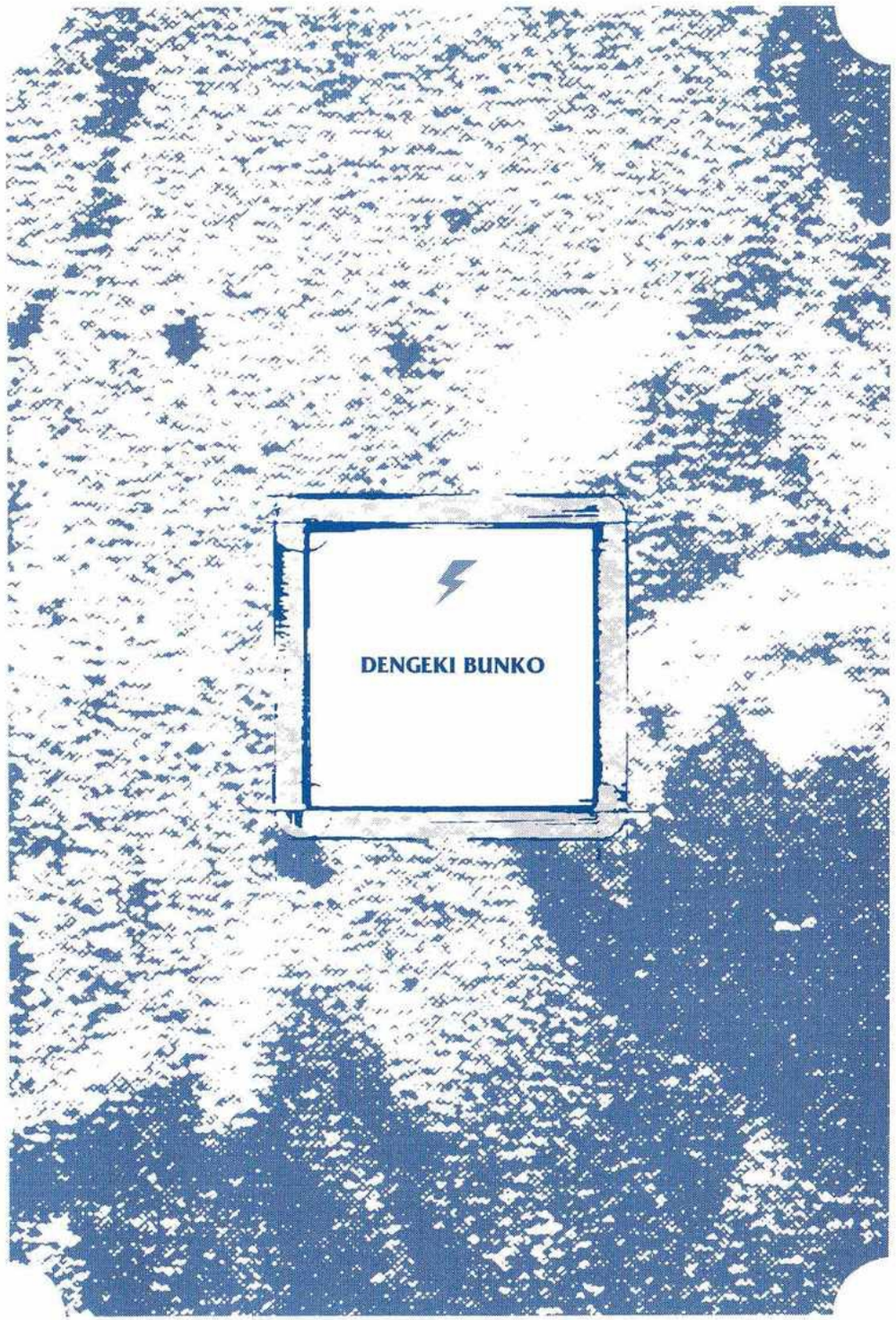
……俺の青春って、一体どーなんの？

電波女と青春男

入間人間

電撃文庫

1711



電波女と青春男

入間人間

イラスト・ブリキ

designed by Yoshihiko Kamabe

「地球は狙われている」

藤和エリオ（トウワ エリオ）

- 布団を上半身にぐるぐる巻きにしている女。
- 俺の青春ポイントの低下要因。
- 身長は160cmくらい（たぶん）。体格は少し痩せ気味。
- 日光に当たらない所為で肌は凄く白い。
- 髪は切ってないようなので長め。色がそのまんま宇宙人っぽい。
- 表情はそこまで変化なさそう。というか、布団があるから表情見えない。
- ずーっと、裸足。

御船流子（ミフネ リュウコ）

- 同級生。
- 俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- 身長は150cm後半。体格は普通。
- 自転車に乗る際には黄色いヘルメットを被っている。
- 顔の各パーツがのんびりした印象の、緩い系。
- 髪は茶髪で、軽くパーマがかっている。ただ手を入れないとすぐに真っ直ぐになる（本人談）。
- 性格は若干天然入った、普通の人。特徴のないのが特徴とか言ってごまかされてた。

「へいっ、テンコーセー」
「なんかその発音だとさ、『転校せい！』って
方言混じりに強要されてるみたいだ」
丹羽 真（ニワ マコト）
●自称、俺。
●身長は170cmちょい。
●田舎暮らしが長かったため、
都会に憧れているっぽい。高校生活とか。
●曲がったことがそこまで嫌いなわけでもない。
●青春ポイント獲得に命をかけている。
●いやまじで。

前川さん（マエカワ サン）

- 同級生。でも下の名前が分からない。
- 俺の青春ポイントの上昇要因。
- 身長は180㎝ぐらい。体格は針金と勝負できるくらいの細身。
- コスプレ趣味がある。制服とか着ぐるみとか。
- 病弱キャラではないのだけど、なんというか虚弱キャラ。
- 全体的にキリッとしてる感じ？
- ハキハキと物事を語って、中性的な語尾が多い。
  でも、女性であることはちゃんと主張する感じ。

「藤和は宇宙人に誘拐されたって話してたよ。
途中から実は自分が宇宙人で、
地球の観察をしてたとか言い出して周囲をどん引きさせたあげく、
退学していったけど」

「まいっか、今はマコ君いるしね。
ちょーっと年の若い旦那さん代わりだけど」

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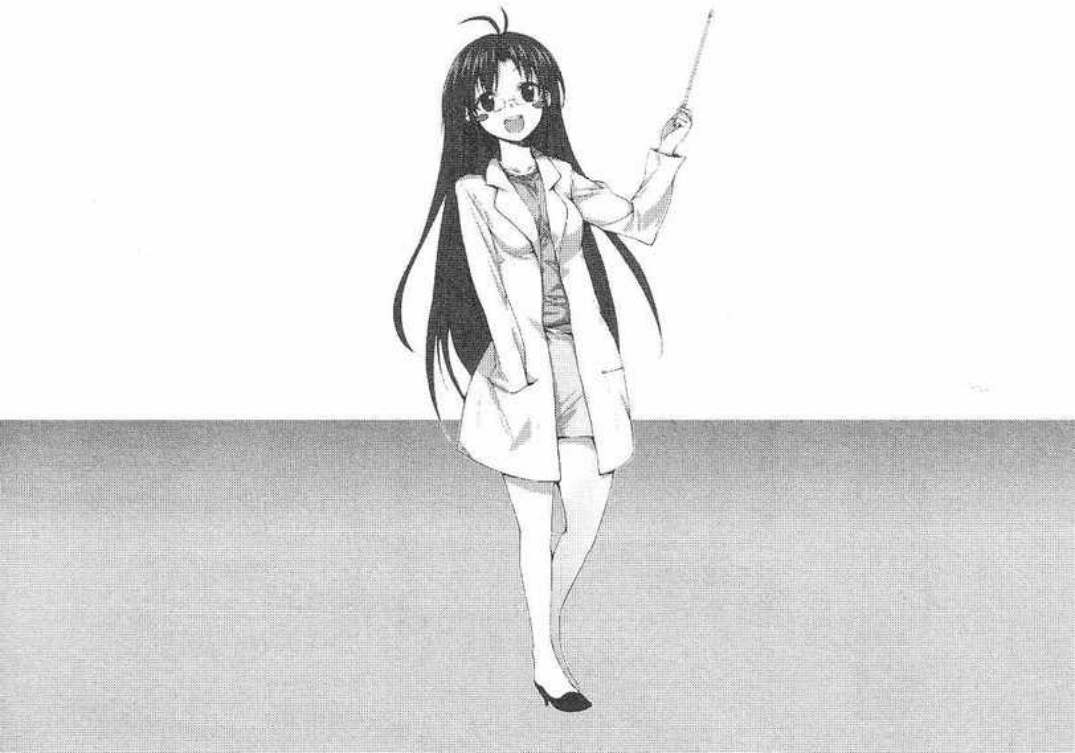
藤和女々（トウワ メメ）

- 叔母。年齢は三十九歳。
- 外見は年齢よりは若め、ということにする。
- いつも笑って、深く考えているようで何も考えていない。
- 俺の青春ポイントの……なんだろ。

電波女と青春男

現在の青春ポイント合計　　±0点



一章『宇宙人の都会』

Chapter One - City of the Aliens

Let's talk about Youth Points.

"Five-Points" is the most which could be scored in a single event; below are some examples.

First and foremost are the One-Point's, such as chatting with girls during recess, eating with friends after school; anything that involves having a normal student life generally generates these points.

But Youth Points depreciate over time, and negligence of these points cancels out any accumulation. These events may be fun at the time, but a lack of memorable highlights is something no high school graduates want.

Next is the two-point. Similar to the above examples, some of the most iconic activities include talking to a girl in the nearby park during the twilight. Two-Point's are mostly One-Point's catalyzed and enhanced by factors such as "night" or "club activities;" if One-Points are the basics, then Two-Points are the applications. They don't come often, but with a bit of wit, chances are definitely not insufficient.

Three-Point activities are riddled with many uncertainties – as the name suggests, they are sort of like the Three-Pointers in a ball game: making a decisive shot isn't easy, yet a successful one can easily turn the table. In short, it is a leap of faith.

A date with a crush easily ranks as a Three-Point; note that, however, regular dates with an actual girlfriend won't gain any more points – these points are limited to single-sided romance or ambiguous relationship.

But at this point, care should be put when determining whether the other is giving ambiguous remarks, or simply drawing lines.

Aside from that, Three-Point's also contain special occasions with group activities. Things like a gathering for a trip, celebrations for clubs, etc, are all very unlikely and therefore score high.

Chances for Four-Point's mostly come from specialized events; school festival is exemplary, but these events have to be participated in with intent: a distinct goal and preemptive steps to prevent any chances that lead to potential point loss.

On the other hand, if the surrounding atmosphere doesn't feel right and fails to build hype, it's hard to get higher points during a sports festival. Most

people can't even enjoy sports to the fullest, reason being that gaps between individuals' athletic abilities are far from small.

Graduation ceremony as well – from the methodical viewpoint, many points can be racked up during this event; after all, crying one's dignity away amidst the sea of sadness could be considered joyous to some.

To begin defining Five-Point's, their subjectivity must first be established. If a person can proudly declare "This is it!" to a specific memory, that, to him, must have been determined as a whole Five-Point.

For example, running wild in town disregarding basic human dignity for a crush; and winning the Koshien championship.[1] Only by stepping on the fine line between permanent PTSD and eternal glory, and sprinting forward can one ever hope to achieve the highest points.

For those without ambition, the tail of a Five-Point is forever out of reach.

In a sense, adolescence can only prosper in a capitalistic manner.

With a deep understanding of the essentials, along with the needed capacity to grow, a person may even get more than twenty Youth-Points in the three years of high school. Such wealth in the future, universities and vocational aspects may not hold much value, however.

But for someone who's reached nirvana, accomplishment feels drastically alien than for the commoners.

Since life's 'process' exists only for 'result,' it is obvious just how significant high school is.

… I was just bored, and came up with these definitions on a whim.

The brain tends to spin when the hands are busy at work, so I couldn't help but think about a few things.

Only, what kind of fetish do I have, getting all excited from stuffing things into boxes? Obsessive Compulsive Disorder? Vertical Movement lover?[2] Rectangle cultist?!

"Ahh, humans do enjoy categorizing. Or should I say differentiating?"

I nitpicked at my own thoughts while humming, and glanced at the television, at the meantime stuffing my luggage. My exuberant feeling contrasted well with the room, which became more and more desolate as time passed. Despite having sleep deprivation, my spirit elated: in all, my condition was top notch.

Like in the common galge's [3], my parents moved oversea, leaving their son with two more years of high school at the house of my aunt. Two days after my official transfer notice was accepted, four more remain before my relocation. For the yearning me, this is like welcoming the peak of my life.

This year is my first ever to not complain about the short break during spring.

I can't wait for the arrival of the next semester.

After all, where I'm going is the city; classes will have more than twenty people, and student stores will have more than just curry bread on their menu. The campus may even have convenience stores, or ten-minute-one-thousand-yen barber shops.

Honestly speaking, from the Youth-Point standard, my past high school life has nothing but negatives. If enrolling into the school equates to starting from zero, then my total points are probably negative three. The points that are lost like my youth – never mind a refund, I can't even keep my own balance. But that changes today.

"Wahahah! Heehee~!" If my neighbor saw the disgusting smug on my face, she'd probably move her house further away. Sense of superiority drove my limbs numb. This feeling is probably the same as those liberated from major exams, when the last of the anxiety melts away. How soothing. Is this how the Cochlea feels after readjusting from a shock? [4]

"I've never been to the sea; I wonder what it's like!" After settling down in the city, I have to ride the train to the beach, and rack those Youth-Points up! If possible, with a girl, and if not, a group is fine.

I put the only prize I ever won during elementary school into the second cardboard box below, and stuffed an entire rope-bound textbook on the top. "Ahh, but I'd probably have to re-buy all the books."

Like a college girl moving out of a crappy apartment agonizing over her old fridge, I tilted my head, immersed in the entertainment that is choice-making.

Regarding the explanation as to where I am living, it is full of things that can make a highschooler like me hop in joy.

My aunt lives alone: she has no husband or children, and she works (of course). In essence, I am living independently with few restrictions. Put into words, it'd the dream every rebellious, pre-pubescent high school boy could only wish for – an evil incubator that they wish to live in even by throwing

away money and pride: “How could anyone simply express this?!” To me, it is probably just the momentary defiance which sought to topple adult’s ‘plan for healthy teen’ that excited me so much.

My hysteria for a new life could probably rival even the joy of apes that defiled a whole field of crops for a delicious meal.

Would a bumpkin like me offend the cliques of the city kids? I couldn’t even care about such problems. My boiling heart beat – so wonderfully that it felt like a nudist streaking through the spring sun.

I feel absolutely terrific.

The four days of combating gravity, turning and defeating the luggage (basically, wasting a lot of energy) are over: the days of my city life finally began.

Two days ago, I bid farewell to my old classmates. It was inevitably disheartening, as in the countryside students tend to stick to the same classes; hence members of the school hardly changes. Even if we only spent about a year together, there were still many familiar faces.

More or less submerged in the sentiment, I think the atmosphere and scene of the parting were satisfactory.

If a girl were to cry for me in front of everyone, I planned on mailing her entire person to where I live. Of course, I ended up not being a kidnapper. With the power of the EMU [5], I said goodbye to the land where I'd lived for almost fifteen years. I didn’t know anyone well enough to have them see me off.

My parents also left Japan about a week ago, heading to somewhere called the Socotra Archipelago or Soviet Union – something like that.

But, if the excitement blooming from the departure was enough to cancel any Youth-Point negativity, wouldn’t my balance be back to zero? As if peering into the horizon of my heart, I felt the compatibility between a great mood and a fresh start.

Being able to experience the welcoming ceremony twice in itself is also rare enough.

Two and a half hours passed quietly as the train seat shook me gently. About midway of the trip, I apparently slept for about an hour. Most of the seats were filled with passengers by the time I woke up, and the scenery outside had changed from fields to houses and factories.

Ear buds stuck in my ears (This grammar may make sense in English, but

it's like saying nosebleed from the nose) returned to silence after finishing another round of shuffle.

I took the iPod out of my pocket and played another song, but listened with little attention as I was barely awake.

With blear eyes, I gazed at the name of a company gardened on their lawn, appealing to some environmentalist messages – Mount Fuji and even the ocean passed my view, all while the PA read out the names of destinations.

'I'm almost there.' I took out my cell and sent a mail to the inbox of my recently-registered aunt.

'I'll meet you right away.' The train hadn't even slowed down, and a reply already arrived.

"....." Was she serious? It's hard to tell from a text! I deemed it to be a friendly response and put my cell back.

Most of my luggage was already delivered to my Aunt's house; I carried only a wrinkly, dry bag which reeks of bleach as my carry-on.

The neighboring purple-haired woman moved her leg for me; I nodded to her, and moved to the walkway. Perhaps led by my walking toward the door, passengers originally standing at the walkway all started the preparation to get off. Every time I brushed by a person, I'd shoot a glance; no signs or stickers to differentiate people of the city and the countryside, nor were there fashionable people clanking with accessories.

I didn't even smell the so-called urban air. My sense of excitement waned.

The train rode into the platform. It was six times the size of the town station where I used to live; people filled the entire stop. I shriveled a bit. Music of my iPod went from piano performance to the howling of a male vocal – a preparation for my courageous journey. The automatic door opened as I plunged first out of the cart; the line began pouring out.

I didn't ride the escalator, instead climbing the stairs towards the ticket booth. Started half-way, I thought for a bit:

My aunt – the person whom I will be living with: what kind of person is she? I've never met her. From the sole information that came from my parents: "She's a big kid - a combination of an adult and a kid." Hence, her name became "Aunt Kamaboko" [6] on my contract list; but how well does this intelligence mix with the overall impression? All I could think of was one of the Yakult salesladies[7].

The ticket machine stopped for a second, but I went through shortly. I dodged to the wall on the side so as to avoid the crowd, and began scouting.

I looked around for my aunt anxiously – more so than the girl with dyed hair next to me, who was probably looking for her boyfriend. My father gave me a twenty-seven year old picture of him and his sibling. But to look for my aunt this way, I might just end up being Urashima Tarou. If anything, I'd rather be Momotarou (TL Note: Urashima Tarou is a fisherman in Japanese legend who rescued a turtle, and was rewarded with a visit to the Dragon God's palace. He stayed for three days, but upon returning, realized that time above had passed three hundred years. Momotarou is also figure in Japanese legend who was born from a giant peach and raised by an old couple. He later on went on a crusade with a dog, monkey and pheasant to defeat the Oni, or demons, terrorizing the land.)

"Makoto!"

Someone probingly called out my name. The little man living in my mind, like a youthful Edison, relayed all of my consciousness (from the Martian station) – coincidentally, his name is resentment. My name is Niwa Makoto. Not Tana, Niwa; not Shin, but Makoto. [8]

I turned to the right in search of the owner of that voice. A refreshing, thirty-some year old woman looked straight at me. Since we are not familiar enough to communicate through our eyes, I had hoped that she'd be more tactful.

I couldn't help but avert my gaze and shut my lips, unsure of what to say during the moment.

"You are Makoto, correct?"

She smiled politely due to my lack of response, and gently asked again. Elegant, refined behaviors of a young girl created a gap between her demeanor and appearance. Plus one to first impression.

“Ah, yes! I am Niwa Makoto. Ugh, nice to meet you!”

I hurriedly bowed. Even I feel with my petty attempt to act polite. “I will be in your care for a while!” Flustered, I added on. Ugh, real smooth.

“No, no. I should say the same.” My aunt bowed as well, her long hair pouring off from her shoulder.

“Ah, I’ll hand you a business card.”

She crudely searched in her purse after straightening her back, and retrieved a plastic card case. She opened the case and handed me a rectangular card befitting the Golden ratio of Fibonacci.

“Thank you, how polite.” I took the card with an absolute mess of a manner and skimmed it:

'Touwa Meme – “Thirty Nine”' A bold double-quotation mark emphasized the age label. It would appear she wants to carry out the “What are frozen shoulders?” way of life, though the business card’s expiration date was barely a year away... [9]

Still… Even though I knew beforehand, her name… How strange.

“Um, Touwa… Probably has an artistic or floral origin, or maybe it’s a generic pseudonym; it may even be the written name of the alter ego, but...”

“It *is* my actual name!”

I sensed every attempt from her airy lines to sound younger. I recognize the characters, but do I read it MeMe, or Jojo? [10]

Perhaps noticing my confusion, my aunt added on:

“Touwa Meme. But you can call me Jojo.”

She blinked. Crow’s feet emerged on the sides of her eyes. If I accidentally spilled it, my life may be cut short. I swallowed gingerly and reevaluated the business card.

The name speaks explicitly about the naming sense of the parents. I would definitely laugh if I saw this somewhere on the web, but I’d rather be polite in front of said person.

“I see~” I gave a simple voice of assent, put the card in my wallet and waited for a sign to move.

“Let's take the taxi home today.”

"Ah, sure. How luxurious!" As I spat out these words, I realized I may have became numbed to them.

Meme-san briskly crossed the road ahead with a genial smile; about half way there, she asked while stroking her hair.

"Are you tired after spending so much time on the train?"

"Yeah, since I haven't been on one since the middle school field trip."

"Is that so~? You are a second year in high school, right? They sure grow fast~"

"Right. Is the school close to your house?"

"Hmm~ it'd take about fifteen minutes on bicycles. Ah, but that's for me – you should be faster."

We prattled along the way, talking about trivial things. One thing that did strike me was Meme-san's unique mien – one that was neither intimate nor estranged. Like warm but sticky water, it's not discomforting, but slightly unnerving.

"Hold up~" Meme-san waved at the green taxi next to hub. I thought it was kind of cute, but I'm not into older women, so I looked to the high school girl from earlier waiting by the light with her boyfriend from a distance away; I stared at the frill of her skirt. How unbearable... No, no; I pushed away the thoughts. 'Are you stupid~?' Even though she mouthed those words to her boyfriend, I did not feel one bit repulsed.

I got into the backseat, Meme-san the passenger seat. She told the gray-haired driver our destination. She spoke quickly, and I didn't even remember a word. I sunk into the seat as I rubbed my heavy eyelids. On a different topic, how come Meme-san sat in the passenger seat when there were only two of us?

For some reason, she didn't especially turn to talk to me. Sigh, even if she did, the conversation would probably just die miserably in this hole. I'm grateful that she didn't try to talk.

As I first entered high school, my parents required me to study at a local university; being able to live the style of life I almost gave up half a year ago, I am deeply grateful for the blessing in the form of Meme-san.

I want to live a semi-independent life in this city. This is a place perfect for growth – nay, for Youth-Points!

My goal for the next two years: a total of fifteen Youth-Points.

Ten minutes after leaving the row of skyscrapers, the car drove into the housing area. Despite that, the environment lacked green; metallic building filled the scene, and I was somewhat bewildered.

The city brimmed with the scent of metal. Compared to my hometown's smell of dirt, it seems to be full of promises.

After my little secret celebration, I met Meme-san's eyes through the rear-view mirror.

That was awkward.

As the taxi passes under an overhanging sign, she suddenly turned back with a radiant smile.

"Welcome to the city protected by aliens."

"…Huh?"

A smile and a sentence more aversive than welcoming.

A jagged ray of confusion mixed with words traveled from my eardrums to the brain.

Judging from the lack of reaction of the driver, I couldn't deny the possibility of mishearing. I sincerely had no words.

"Eh~ No reaction?" Meme-san put up a fake smile with wide eyes.

"There are many sightings of UFO's here – kind of like in Florida?" She explained.

"Oh~" I see how it is. Before I understood, I thought "maybe this person is an alien fanatic?" Maybe she was born during the time of MMR? [11]

But youth does not belong in the milky ways. Potential points set in my mind began to dwindle in their number.

"Older grocery stores even sell these 'seventh-dimension' key chain figures!"

"I don't understand, limiting technology like that in a three-dimensional shop."

Besides, aliens and dimensions may sound relevant, but are in fact unconnected. The difference between them is like that of electronic and rhetoric.

"Do you want to go straight home, or explore a bit?"

Meme-san confirmed the definite part of my travel, and asked me for the indefinite part. “Hmm, let's see.” I scratched at my temple, taking my time before answering.

“I can make a simple introduction for ya if we walk home.”

She spoke with just the right amount of kindness – enough to be wiped away with a finger; enough to not make things awkward.

“Have to take care of the luggage… Let’s just stay home.”

I hesitated at the word ‘home:’ whether I should have added ‘auntie’s home.’ But for brevity's sake, I didn’t bother. Maybe talking like this can actually bring us closer in the end.

“Alrighty~ Then let’s have dinner at home!”

The smile on her face never faded till she turned the other way.

And so, the taxi drove on the asphalt road for five more minutes.

“Ah, this is it.” Following Meme-san’s instruction, the taxi stopped at a plain spot with no landmark. Left door to the back seats opened automatically as I first exit the car. I glanced at the taxi meter as I left; with the allowance my parents gave me, I can at least ride twice back-and-forth. Speaking of which, where do I get allowance from now on?

Part time jobs? Or are my parents sending it to Meme-san?

“Here we are – Makoto’s second home~”

Meme-san stood next to me after paying the taxi. According to her, I can live here like at my own house (how shameless of me).

Though I would like to elaborate, there really wasn’t much to describe in my new abode.

It was very normal: an inconspicuous house. If someone took a picture of it and posted it everywhere around town, no one would compliment it, saying things like “Wow! What a wonderful mansion” – any comment like that would probably result in suspicions like “Is this a new form of house fanaticism?” Sigh, maybe this house only appears normal, but is full of mechanics and traps like a ninja’s house – spinning hidden doors and junk, things impractical in real life.

“Let’s head in!”

“Oh yes, uh, I’ll be in your care now.”

Before stepping inside, I greeted once again. If a son's attitude is less than stellar, others will doubt his parents' teaching!

"How polite of you." Meme-san copy-pasted my line – of course, recycling and using it with a different tone of voice. "That should be my line, really. Sorry, please excuse everything."

She swiftly replied… hmm? Just now, I thought I heard something like an apology blended into her words…?

Ahh, she meant "sorry if my mansion was so grand?" I must have came off a bit too cocky~

Aunt Meme opened the slide-door before I even finished solving the mystery. I followed as she disappeared into the entrance hall. I tried sniffing, curious to know what type of life transpired here… Just then –

"I'm home!"

She deftly took her shoes off and landed lightly onto the hallway… Hold up.

Before putting your slippers on,

Before calling my name,

Before putting on that smile,

There is something by your feet you should watch out for!

I can see the imaginary starting-line drawn by my feet distort.

"Makoto, try saying that too!"

But she ignored my piercing gaze, and repelled it with a money-worthy smile.

The world's focus blurred instantly.

"…Eh, ah… Yes..." I answered while locking my sight to the lower right.

I came from the country side, but I can't speak in its accent, and my pronunciation is rather stiff. This is not important, but… Next to the carpet laid on the entrance hallway, there was something – no, *someone*?

… From then, my enthusiasm paralleling that of a kid's night before field trip was frozen off by an omen that spread in my heart.

It's like seeing an abnormally cute puppy, but only being able to think "What's wrong with the furball? The fleas are everywhere now!" and refusing

to hug it.

The pile of thing dropped a load of ‘reality’ into my dreamy life.

On the lovely entrance that will later see the reluctant me off to school, and welcome an absolutely tired me home…

A Chikuwa-like object lay there. [12]

That person fashioned — to be precise, *swallowed* by the outfit — an attire tasteless anywhere on the globe,

Fully expanded toes, completely throwing the doubt of sleeping on the floor out of the window,

That thing nagged at my brain, and I wanted to stomp on it and kick it around.

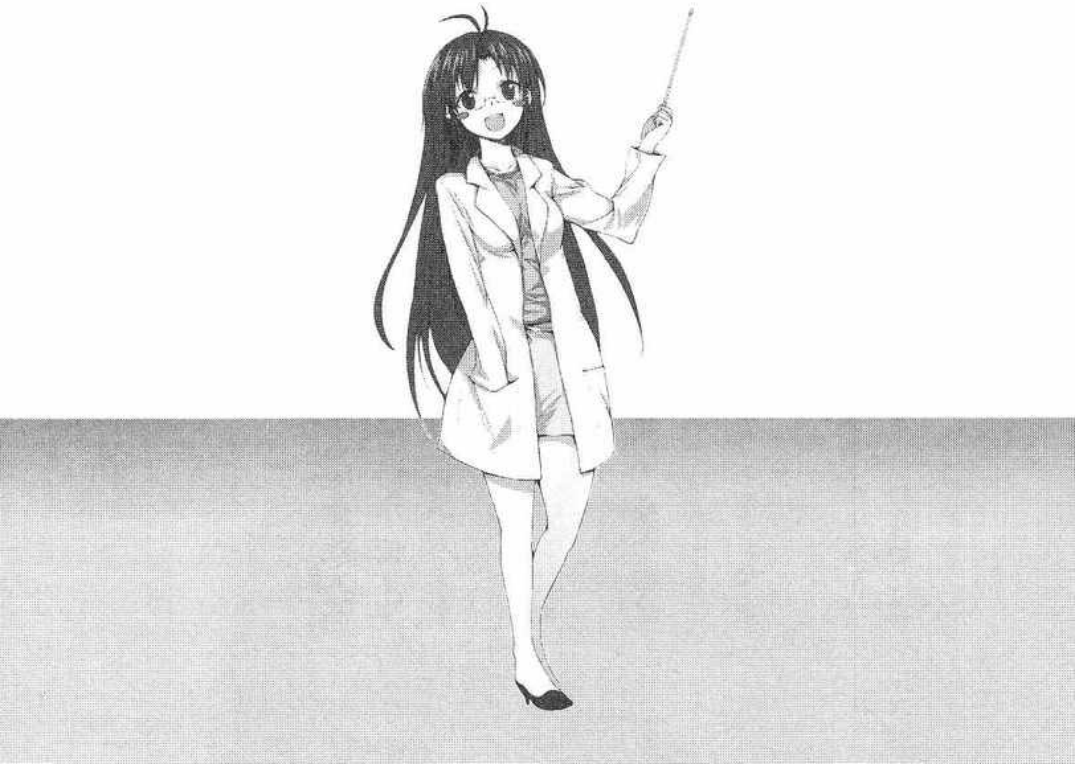
"……"

The spring sun shone down through the frosted glass and into the entrance. A chill froze up my back as droplets of sweat perspired. I sensed wiggly lines on my forehead, poking and dancing on the skin.

My Youth-Points are slapped back to the negatives.

- 田舎の高校生活の総計。 −3
- 同級生との別れ、新生活への高揚感。 +3
- 叔母の家で、ちくわめいたもの発見。 −5

現在の青春ポイント合計 −5



- Total score at last school: -3
- Sense of superiority, living a different life: +3
- Discovering Chikuwa-object at my Aunt's house: -3

Youth-Point Total: -5

二章『変態観測』

Chapter Two - Perverse Observation

The unmoving Chikuwa lay there.

Maybe it's a robot that ran out of power and (Skip). Sigh, despite my efforts, things still aren't less complicated. It's not like I could deny it, but this is probably the limit of my Japanese skill. I am, after all, a successful student who summarized an entire essay into "the author's self-comforting behavior" and still managed to score a barely solid check mark on the exam.

"Okey-Dokey~ The house isn't too messy, please come in. I even cleaned up yesterday, but the house is still small, so I hope you don't mind~"

Meme-san waved drolly at an astonished me. My legs, however, seemed to resist moving toward the trap lying by its master's feet. The bumpkin's aspiration for the city sunk – as it fell, something felt as if it would explode any second.

The torso of that object – the arms and the head – was rolled up into the futon as it lay on the ground capriciously. Rope for drying laundry completed the bundling process, and the rest of its body was exposed like a piece of Burdock in Chikuwa. No, this is without a doubt abnormal. By the way, Calamus-pattern covered the entire roll – obviously it knew about its own calamity.

The person buried in this futon should be completely blind, for the sheet was its world. Of course, I couldn't see its face. It remained motionless, almost at the level of furniture.

But looking closely, the toes on those slender legs moved ever-so-slightly. A girl…? I spotted the corners of a shirt and a skirt – it'd appear to be a living organism.

The delicacy her figure emits appears serious – a joking kick may end up being an assault. "Hmm?" Meme-san smiled cutely with tilted head. Led by her vague countenance, a twitching smiled cracked from my face.

"My, still being so polite? It's not good to be a stranger~!"

She suddenly flung another line at me. By the way, the words were paired with a flirtatious gaze. 'Dry-eye beam, fire!' The words appear with the devilish act.

"……Waah?"

"Oh? Was that out of character?" My aunt, who played dumb shamelessly,

inquired.

"No… Uh…" If it were fifteen years ago, I probably would have fallen for it!

"That's good; my target is to achieve a 'gap-moe' character – do you know what 'moe' is? [13]

"For the sake of my future development, I refuse to know."

"For example, a "she could defeat Rikidouzan[14], even though she's my aunt!" kind of character."

"No!" I shouldn't have played along: "Who cares about that kind of niche? Does a pitcher who only throws sliders sound interesting??"

Basically someone whose dream is doomed from the get-go due to a terrible pitching stat.

At this point, I decided to pretend to have never seen that 'thing.' "Whoa~ What a beautiful house..." I tried my best complimenting the house while crossing the wooden hallway. "It feels very exotic~" My fingers felt everything I saw.

The light glass reflected my face – my eyelids looked *very* heavy.

"Your room is upstairs, second floor. The closer of the two is yours."

"Got it." I turned toward the entrance as I listened; mysterious object X remained motionless. If she's the type of relative who dresses up for practices jokes, she should be chasing me for my negligence; yet nothing of the sort happened. Mom and Dad told me my aunt lives alone – what happened to that??

Judging from current situation, I think the seeds of Youth-Point will remain fallowed in this house.

"If there is anything, you're welcome to tell me~"

Really? Then I will skip the honorifics, and begin the machine-gun talk!

"No. I am more than happy to have a place to live."

With a stream of refreshing words, I brushed over my wavering heart.

In the end, I tenuously climbed up the stairs without looking back.

The shady omen crawled from the entrance hall and entwined me.

And so, I slept in a room full of unopened boxes for about two hours.

I'd be lying if I say I didn't mind the bamboo-shoot bacon roll downstairs, but once decided that I shouldn't care, a burning, defiant sense of "I want to be in a futon too!" drove me into slumber.

Somehow, the raw honesty of the above statement and conclusion depresses me.

Just like my perturbed mind, the bed (currently made of softened wood planks) felt terrible. Repeated Stage 1 Sleep's even gave me a headache. As I went down stairs, sloppily sweeping away the cold sweat from my forehead, dinner was served.

… But something else was also being prepared.

"I gave it my all today~!" The thirty-nine year old woman hopped energetically in front the myriad of dishes.

"….Oh." I stole a glance to my right.

"Starting tomorrow, we won't have much chance to eat dinner together! Makoto, can you cook?

"Uh, dishes without using the knife, maybe…" Cold sweats dripped.

"Ahaha! As expected of a boy~"

She clapped twice – my answered satisfied her, for some obscure reason,.

"How come you're all fidgety? Is there something wrong?" Nothing is wrong? Are you Buddha himself? How many enlightenment and molting does it take to be so nonchalant? We aren't in reality anymore!

The futon-roll sat upright next to the table, its exposed protein in the form of legs pointed outward.

"Should I not see this? Shouldn't I? Something from my right is bothering me."

"The so-called spirits apparently will appear only from the left side..."

"I don't want to discuss the investigation between science and the super natural over dinner… Fine, I get it. I am not good at being circuitous, so I'll just say it."

"My, are you proposing?"

"I'm not talking about the bulb of a hyacinth[15]!"

I blew up, intentionally making that pun. I didn't get adopted here as a son-in-law, right? I released my legs from the proper sitting posture, flinging these

trivial doubts out.

“Meme-san, you lied.”

I pointed my finger rudely at my aunt. Was I lied to? The fire of rage in my heart burned, like a happy college student introduced to a two-roomed apartment for only 37,000 yen a month, only to be disappointed by a run-down, crappy room, giving me all the rights to resort to such audacity.

Meme-san rested the chopsticks she just picked up, altering her facial muscles and smiled:

“Lie? “Makoto Exposes a Lie!” looks pretty cool on paper!” [16]

“Oh yeah, you are right...” The tension almost tuned out. Detective does sound pretty cool… Hold on!

“...You don’t live alone.”

“N-no way~” She couldn't be any less convincing.

“...How is this possible? Can a hungry person really be this angry?”

“Oh dear, I heard stomach cramp comes from working too hard~”

Just like that, Meme-san struck down my complaints.

Well, no; I just didn't sound serious enough.

“Can you prove it?”

“Proof…?” I smacked the futon-roll with the back of my hand: “This is proof.”

Wham! The roll fell back like a punching bag and immediately balanced itself with its toes. She appears to be unrelated to turtles.

“Arara~” Meme-san looked at the evidence’s movement and spat out a banal reflection.

“I'm not good with being circuitous, so what is this?”

“To explain, I'd have to be quite euphemistic.”

I feel provoked by her continuous joke even after my accusation. It's quite petty, but I feel that I should probably be able to intimidate a woman.

If my opponent was someone named “Gyuu Saburou,” a muscular man with a size matching his name (and secretly likes dolls, if possible), I’d probably give a courtesy laugh while avoiding eye contacts, muttering “Sorry, I'm so sorry,” and be crowned the class’s king of cowards.

“Then, please tell enlighten me.”

I smacked the futon again. The roll didn’t tumble this time, but its innards remained motionless—whoever is inside could be a mannequin.

If that’s the case, I doubt my aunt’s sense of decoration.

Hence my 'independent life' became 'dark days after a nuclear war with an outlandish family.' This year’s disbursement rate on my Points is guaranteed to double.

“In the early 1900’s, a dark shadow covered a small country town in rural America...” Meme-san cleared her throat.

“How about without the preface?” I immediately requested an omission.

“It’s great to be young~” But Meme-san did not waver:

“Even the word 'impatience' sounds good next to 'youth.' If I were to fight for a time-sale in a crowd, people would just give me the eyes.”

“I think the problem is with your bloodshot eyes...” Due do her looking away, it suddenly became my job to corroborate with her. Wait, the conversation is straying again. What kind of crappy, easily derailed structure is this conversation made of?!

“Hold up, it doesn’t matter to me if a bag of eggplants is only 150 yen or if minced meat’s on sale. My problem is—” Like knocking on a toilet stall, I slapped the futon-roll.

“Oh, the dishes will get cold! Herry erp end ert, Merkerto (Hurry up and eat, Makoto)~”

“What language was that last part spoken in?!”

I slapped the roll instead of the table.

It became a cathartic motion, and I even tried to add rhythm to it.

And thus, the blanket roll retaliated.

“Ow! Ow!” Someone ambushed me from below, kicking me swiftly in the shin. My knee jerked upward and slammed right into the table; I moved backward,bent down, and saw the 'face' of my perpetrator.

“Whoa!” I pulled back. A leg flew over in aim of my forehead. It was from the futon, and it was a willful attack.

“You've got to be kidding…” Not a mannequin: I was careless because the skin didn’t look organic.

“EEEitsalevelfourcontactttselfdefenseinitiated!”

“Hah?” A grumble came from within the roll. Frankly, the Japanese in those lines was abbreviated to mere bones.

“**Pardon?**[17]” I stuck my ear closer to the source of this voice, hoping for a repeat.

“EEeyaa…”

“Agh, nevermind.” I gave up. Words spat out with a kick don’t matter anyway; the point though is the realization that 'this things speaks.'

A pair of angry legs swung like a certain pirate ship ride somewhere in Chiba. Presumably from her lack of sight, she could only lock-on to a general direction. She's missing out on a lot of things. Like life.

“MissingEEEsentienttttobeservationeasilydisallowedtoUUUme.”

I couldn’t comprehend. I couldn’t even tell what she was saying. Though it is anybody’s freedom to talk through sheets of blanket, I still wish she could at least use a translator. Just eat a Translate Jelly![18]

“Irresponsiblecarbonbasedorganisminotherwordsyou.”

“……”

I stared at the futon; the migraine that subsided came creeping back from my neck. I give up. If I try thinking about this, my boundlessly-developing (yes, it is) frontal lobe[19] may be mysteriously slaughtered by aliens.

“Please translate.”

I sought help from my reliable and beautiful aunt (a combination of three propitious words).

“She said ‘nice to meet you.’ She’s my daughter: Touwa Erio.”

Your translating prowess may be professional, knowing that you didn’t listen to a single word!

“…Daughter?” Relative; family, not single.

My mood was slaughtered like blue sky painted with water-color scribbled by a permanent marker. My fist trembled as I spoke:

“What the hell is a daughter??”

“**My Daughter.**”

“It’s hard to complain like this: could you elaborate?” No, that’s not the

point!

"And **You are** a virgin."

"Shuddup!" There's not many opportunity in the country; it's not my fault!

Even though that was kinda just an excuse!

"What happened to you living alone??" Like a torrent, I demanded an explanation for the crucial part of my dream.

"Didn't I act like I lived alone ever since meeting you?"

With neither guilt nor a joking smile, Meme-san answered vaguely.

"Ah, uh…" I was speechless. Lightly and effortlessly, Meme-san turned the tide of the atmosphere and further pursued:

"Is there a problem?"

"No, like… For example, your reasons for ignoring the—That's it, now you've done it!"

The automated defense system far more unreliable than plastic-bottle-cat-repellants kept attacking me under the table. I pressed the roll-with-legs down; it crashed backward, exposing its panties.

I, however, felt no temptation. As a healthy high schooler, I can't even stay calm looking at the pink underwear on the displayed model in stores. Yet the panties of the futon roll merely looked like an extra piece of cloth. The color was solar yellow, by the way.

But all I saw was a field of copper (it sounds like a secret move, so I remembered).

"Uwah…Uun!" The roll that tipped over, a.k.a Touwa Erio muttered something. I couldn't understand a word; it sounded the same as the shattering cry of a child who wasn't allowed to buy a toy.

"Dammit… this is wrong. What is going on??" Dreams are only beautiful when peered from afar, a voice whispered, breathing the air of despair into my ear drum. Youth-Points: negative two.

My crumbling torso could collapse on the table at any time. My solitary life shouldn't be this rowdy. No, I'm not alone... I almost sung these words out, remembering a song with similar lyrics. But since I can't remember the rest of the song, I'll just hum it.

"Hey~ Makotocchi." "'Chi…'" You should give up on the whole gap-moe

thing – keeping forcing it and you will get a cramp!

"Can I keep explaining?" "...Explain what?"

I'm not some famous person printed on the old bills: there is no way I'd remember any of this brainless topic[20]. Rather than making a discussion, Meme-san sounded like she was just making conversation.

"The man's name was George, the woman's name was Maria." [21]

"Please don't casually tell stories like Junichi Yaoi would." [22]

"Eh? Makoto's generation doesn't know this game anymore?"

'Don't assume every topic works with people who are twelve years younger!' <- What I thought.

"Yeah!" <- What I actually said.

A little lie can't be helped, especially when living in Japan.

From my look of anguish, Meme-san smiled even brighter – her teeth looked at least three times brighter.

Those enamels still look twenty, I thought. This is still irrelevant.

"Aha~ Makoto and I are already besties!"

"For realzies!" With just the bare-bone of speech, my desire to speak politely has completely diminished.

"Umumumu~" Brandishing her legs, the thing (since she's my aunt's daughter, wouldn't she be my cousin?) with hope of getting the world's backstroke champion kept giving the new resident an over-the-top panties service.

But she is just a roll. No one's getting excited, and her speech is just alarming. Even now, what vocabularies she managed to squeeze out consists of atoms or essence – some seriously chaotic content indecipherable from the words themselves.

"From now on, let's live happily together as a family of two!" Meme-san's brain remains fried.

"Please do a recount."

I can't deal with the infinitely growing numbers of questions and complaints, so I resorted to responding to the latest one like a frog an insect flying about its front. Even though my headache inconceivably disappeared, my tired throat burned as if hot sand were poured in.

"Basically, that croissant-like thing is… your daughter. Right?"

"Hm… Ah, you mean that? Ignore it." My aunt's refreshing smile overruled any objection.

What sort of mother-daughter relation is this?! Even if I asked, she'd probably brush me off with a "don't mind it~" so I didn't even try. A daughter whose existence is unknown to her relatives: isn't this situation a bit delicate? Why hide this from my parents? Questions like these proliferated.

"Ah, is my uncle also here?" I scanned around.

"Ara~ My husband's name is George." Since when is your name Maria?

"ConscienceanddesireinflatedDDDprograminjected!"

Like a worm traveling on its cilia, the blanket-woman wriggled her entire body, waving her two legs around. Meme-san and I stared piteously at the blanket comedian whose futile attacks were as if attempting to step on some air-pedal. I firmly grasped the feeling of a pilot overlooking at villagers attempting to shoot down the jet with dart guns.

"Hiya-!!" However, when her toes caught onto the side of the table and lifted upward with all her might, the situation changed.

The figure of a lonesome fisher – I could almost see the splashes.

Sigh, it's time to cut the losses.

Organisms evolve to overcome gravity.

Meme-san's dishes, likewise, attempted to fly with imperfect wings.

And so, they welcomed the destined fall.

Food splashed about; the cacophony surpassed even the pointless chimes hung in front of restaurants during summer time.

"EEEEYAAAAAAAH!!" My aunt screeched an unknown noise as she witnessed the crash.

The roll's self-defense mechanism shriveled from her pained toes, completely unaware of her own folly.

"Waaaoooo!" She cried in pain and struggled dramatically.

I earnestly hoped that someone would pull the curtain and dim the entire world.

As for later that day, I have no recollection.

Perhaps an excellent scientist erased some of my neurons with a machine – I relied on the nonsensical imagination to explain reality. My Youth-points inexplicably dropped by three more points; I felt sorrowful for some reason.

☆

Even though there remain too many unsolved problems, I am becoming a transfer student starting tomorrow morning.

I don't need fire, neither am I mysterious, so I guess I will just be a carefree person![23]

All I have left after giving up living alone is a healthy high school life.

At least compared to this house, the school offers more chance for points.

I put on a shirt, and then wore the new uniform prepared by Meme-san. It's a bit bigger – could it be her anticipation for my future growth?

I tugged lightly at the collar, grabbed my brand-new backpack; it gleamed brightly, but today is only the opening ceremony, so it was rather flat. As for textbooks, I'd have to ask the home-room teacher.

Pinching the pack under my armpit, I scanned the room. The luggage which I planned to sort out last night was untouched, even my casual clothes for days-off were unorganized.

"…Lets just forget about yesterday." At the same time, I again sealed away any aspiration for a solitary life.

With anticipation for the future, I arrived at the faucet to take care of my hair. Jaunting on the fir-wood hallway before going downstairs, I glanced into the open door to the room on the left.

"……Whoa."

A hand-made mini-planetarium on the table and an extravagant telescope on the corner of the room—a room where a cosmos enthusiast inhibits. Wow… Amazing – a ball chair! This is the first time I've seen such a treasure, but isn't that chair worth at least a couple hundred-thousand yen?

Initially I pictured the room to be "lacking femininity while permeated with the smell of incense" or some such smoke-filled room, but now I am quite surprised.

Yet the books lined up on the shelf, E.G "Laws of Motion," "Subconscious and Nature," are items indefinitely disparate from the everyday life and disturbed me a bit. A map of some town hung on the wall in the back – at least

there wasn't anything pointing to the revival of some cult.

Naturally, the blanket-entwined person lied on the floor.

Like a deep-sea eel lurking in corpses, the creature with its torso stuck within the futon boldly displayed its feet without moving.

Her clothes were, however, changed: purple polka dot pajama concealed her legs. Personally, I wanted to tie a rope onto her exposed feet and drag her around the street while madly laughing "Wahahaha!" Out of concern of the feminist group, however, I have to unfortunately give up on that notion. Speaking of which, must be quite difficult to identify her gender from afar.

Even the pattern of the blanket was humbly changed from Calamus to Plum Blossom and Oriole.

How old is she? Does she go to school? There's an ironed uniform on the wall. Well, that's not important.

"Hm…" Come to think of it, this does count as living under the same roof as another girl.

From some perspective, this is the final stop of all pubescent boys' delusion. Compared to the girl-falling-from-sky scenario, this is slightly more realistic and even messier. I can't let go of this idea, and it won't go away from my brain.

"But…" Getting more points is still rather difficult in this situation – Chikuwa doesn't have gender! Even though I don't know what they are made of, hahahah… I should leave. The blanket girl might wake up if I mess with her.

After all, she was giant swung by an insane mother, mistaken for a rocket by the neighbor and forced to practice the art of sumo – how tiresome… Crap, the memories are coming back. Must eliminate those other-dimensional delusion...

In layman's term, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is that of the three-dimension and two-dimension. The raucous uproar last night (raucous refers to the sound effect most heard during the certain commotion) on the level of a third-grade comedy novel made an imaginative me create a brilliant and delusional motion picture that lasted about five minutes before getting cut short.

Quickly escaping to futon-roll and the room, I jumped down the last two steps of the stairs and landed with a solid thud. The house surrounded by

silence digested the refreshing motion, and the glass doors sighed gently.

If Meme-san is home, I'd like to greet her before going to the faucet. So I began searching. First stop is the kitchen – to be honest, I was just grasping at the vague hope of breakfast being there.

Yet the kitchen remained looking ravaged by the Red Tornado. It was a mess – the local gang may even demand an entrance permit if I were to walk in there. Wherever did clean-up time go?

In the center of the dining table, where the wreckage of food and plates were forcefully pushed away, two pieces of notes and a paperweight frolicked. I feel sorry for bothering them when they are playing, but I pulled the paper out from under the weight and glanced at the note.

One of the notes was a map from home to school. It didn't have any drawing, and instead all the directions were written – quite original, actually. 'Veeeery long~' she wrote, visually trying the best to demonstrate the long road near the residents. The level of her navigational skill is slightly more useful than the unfriendly hints in RPG's.

In addition, the other note written in scarily rigid fonts (with at least two parts of the finishing and the outlines being completely straight) was mainly message left for me.

'Take care of your own needs. The peace of tomorrow rests on the efforts of today~★'

I crumbled the paper to test my grip strength. Doing everything so logically – as expected of my aunt!

"She never waste a single moment in life!"

Since I do not intend to plant the flag for her, my aunt probably won't show up too many times from now on.

Alright, for the sake of a good first impression with classmates and others, let's go tidy up at the mirror!

"Mm~" Not bad… In terms of good-looking. Standing in front of the mirror, I rated my appearance.

Not too shabby from an objective view, though the judgment was likely mixed with my own subjectivity.

For the next seven minutes and thirty seconds, I ceaselessly sorted my bangs, and desperately tried to cover the reddened pimple on my forehead

with makeup. I have returned to being a high school freshman.

Following the direction Meme-san wrote on the paper, I dragged out an unlocked bike stuffed in the outdoor storage room and pat the dust off it. Every part of the bicycle was rusted, as if soaked in water; swarms of raging insects like rag worms living in capes poured out when I rung the bell. Ugh, I averted my eyes.

This bike may have been the futon girl's.

"…Mm?" I think I've this bike somewhere before… For example, that red-white paint covering the back of the rust mark. Hm, whatever. Probably not a big deal.

I tried sitting on it, and after checking that the two wheels could barely turn, I pedaled hard without much expectation. I noticed from a long time ago that, basically, the degree of disappointments from reality scales positively with the level of expectation. Let's be wise. We'll be myopic. Live a gloomy, musty life. That's it.

Every now and then, I glanced at the diagram (or is it a map?) and rushed through the 'veeeeeery long~' road all while emitting that screech noise. This map, upon closer inspection, with "Obligatory Cheat Route" and "Portal to World 4-1" doesn't really have much credibility – but I've already decided to not hold any expectation: as long as I get there, all is well.

I passed through an alley narrow enough to almost pinch the sides of my bike and traversed the trees near the residential, and finally to the big road. The amount of bicycles and pedestrians increased exponentially, and I even had the illusion of a germ bomb exploding.

Buildings more than three stories high stood naturally on both sides; though the road is more than wide enough, the wave of people still cramped the entire walkway. Also within the crowd were students in the same uniform as I, as well as high school girls in different attires (of course).

There were even some scattered students eating with their friends at the sushi stores and Mister Donut midway – completely different than in the country where everyone finishes the breakfast prepared by his mom. Rest assured: this is the city~ I immersed myself in my rustic ways.

Besides, other students flung looks of bewilderment as they easily bypass my rusty utility bike that lacked gear shift or any superior function. Due to the direction of the sun, their expressions were unclear to me.

I felt paraded. Thus, I lowered my head and pedaled my hardest.

About half way, I met a group of high school girls with the same uniform that was hanging in the room of that futon girl. It seems like that is the girl uniform of the school I'm going to.

In about fifteen minutes later, I successfully reached the destination something-something Second High School without getting lost. See, this is what I meant by not having expectation:

Being able to enjoy indubitable facts – to an extent.

A tiny, opened school gate, with the pathway leading inside glamorously carpeted by the fallen pedals from the cherry blossoms that grew on the sides. When the trees bud in May, caterpillars will probably dominate the flowery highway. And so I poured a bucket of cold water at the scenery. To the left was a rather open field, with some guys in track suits racing on the runway. Are they training in the morning? Just looking was satisfying: their contribution to raise the youthfulness of the setting.

I stood by the fences for a bit, squinting in envy at the sports club member who frolicked as they sprinted.

Obtained one Youth point – after all, the scoring guide is rather loose on the first day.

I shook my head lightly to fling the drowsiness away, and headed toward a man who appears to be the security.

"Excuse me, where is the parking lot for bicycles?"

"New student?" He sounded surprise, probably because I was walking with my bike.

Should I start walking to school tomorrow? I proposed a debatable topic to my brain.

"Yes, I'm a transfer student!"

"Oh, I see. Then head back to outside first, circle around the school and you'll see another gate. A lot of bikes are parked to the left of it."

"Thank you!" Security of the city was very kind. Starting today, you are 'Mister Security' in my heart!

"Beep – Beep – backing up." I murmured to myself as I pulled the bike back to the road in front of the entrance. I begin stepping on the weighty pedal to follow the lazily-moving bikes ahead of me.

Amongst teachers handing out class distribution sheets like newspaper, I

traversed the flocking students and successfully reached my shoe locker. In any case, heading to the staff's faculty has to be the first step!

"……" Speaking of which, where is the administrator's room? Looking up, I hoped to see maps on the ceiling like those in the station, yet all I got was a pair of exhausted eyes blinded by the florescent light.

I'm also hesitant to ask one of those teachers handing out sheets with professional precision. Without an alternative, I decided to find my target by walking around. I'm not without some sense of direction; I'll find it eventually. Brand new indoor slippers squeaked on the floor. I proceeded down the hallway, away from the raucity.

Perhaps due to the campus being ventilated by the smell of people, the hallway corner exuded a smell like unopened mint-flavored gum, emanating a clean and fresh scent. Paired with the morning rays seeping in from the window, it was very comforting.

Strolling aimlessly, I easily located the Staff's Room. After passing through the hallway into another building, I found the office sign hanging welcomingly there; I walked up without hesitation.

Just as I began pacing suspiciously outside the door like a first grader, the savior arrived.

"Ah, are you a transfer student?"

A thirty-some year old man with short, gravity-defying hair saw and walked toward me. Upon closer inspection, his hair was sharpened with gel; it may even jab those who dare to touch. Tragedy awaits for any lady who offers her laps to him.

"Let's take a look…" The teacher altered between the picture and my face. It would be rather dreadful if he were to somehow deem the two different. "Niwa, Makoto. Is that how you say it?" "Yes. Nice to meet you!" "Hm… Ah, I've never heard of this place." "Hahahah, it *is* pretty out there!" Now I'm not bragging, but I have absolute confidence of hitting the fifty-two point mark with that cheery response. Even the teacher chuckled awkwardly:

"I'm your homeroom teacher in class 2, so remember my face… Alright, I'm heading to the classroom; follow me. Since this is the beginning of a new semester, just think of it like an extension to new class division!"

To ease some tension, the teacher prattled while walking me to the class. His appearance exudes a subtle athletic atmosphere, full of ambition to get popularity amongst the female students.

After leaving the Staff's room, the teacher didn't speak much on our way to the class. Instead, his attention fell on the stack of paper in his hands, instead of the speechless space between us. Even my gaze drifted around the skirts of passing girls, as should any healthy high school student.

We returned to the building with shoe lockers and climbed upstairs. Judging from the sign, second-year class rooms are on the second floor. Third-year on third floor, and held-back on the rooftop… And if that were true, the school board will definitely be issued a strict probation order – and that's just ridiculous!

For starters, the rooftop on which the chances for amassing Youth Points are significantly higher has restricted access in every school campus. People won't fight for food in the cafeteria and campus stores, and the nurse in the infirmary won't be a hottie in white uniform. Even if one were to fight tooth and nail with reality, the most he could accomplish is just having somewhat different activities with friends; and even those are rare, outlandish exceptions.

"Class instruction is in just a bit, and then you can introduce yourself to everyone." My homeroom teacher spoke swiftly. I couldn't help but feel this is the first time speaking to an adult in the city; after all, the woman I met yesterday is someone more worthy of the title 'Thirty-nine-year-old Child.'

"Morning!" Releasing a salutation like an air freshener, the teacher yelled with full throttle as he entered the room. I followed without a sound, and roughly fifteen people beamed their gaze on me at once. Perhaps because the seating hasn't been decided, everyone casually stood between the tables and chattered, and only a few sat.

Properly ignoring the stares, I looked for my last name on the seat assignment table written on the black board in Gojuuon-order[24]. Incidentally, I sit in the center of the classroom.

People naturally moved out of my way, and thus I swiftly reached the spot. Even in the city, school desks are made of wood like in the country. As for the reason, well, probably because metal ones could cause some serious toe-tribulation for students in tantrum.

My neighbor was busy reading pages of a book. She had scary eyes emitting a standoffish aura, and a head of bobbed hair (this is irrelevant, but until now, hearing the word bob only make me think of foreigners). But even from the side, her cuticles looked quite smooth. The hair was so thin, if it were a man's, it'd be seen as a sign of balding. Even her makeup was right on the mark. Her eyelashes are so long… and so I stole glances of her side face to pass

time.

…… Thinking of which, this person is really tall. No, way too tall – like one-eighty centimeters?

Though her height is menacing, she still managed to give off a frail air – impressive.

When the bell rang, I thought about the empty shelf in my new, dusty room all while resting on my arm.

Somehow, the thought of having to take care of my luggage when I get home saddens me.

☆

Concisely, I finished my mundane introduction.

Even though I just transferred in, this is the month of April, when the new semester starts and everyone advances one year. New faces in class are but normality, so no special attention was given to me.

I conservatively introduced myself with the standard "name-and-home" procedure; playing the clown before confirming the tolerance level of this new environment could lead to ostracization by my classmates, and I do not want to transfer again – in tears.

Thus during class meeting, I sat duly and looked for cute girls around the class. Disregardful of the result, I noticed the differences between city and country girls. Namely, the makeup they wear. Country girls either have too little or too much; city girls have just about right, or a bit on the heavy side.

Then, after an assembly with nothing worth noting, school ended before noon.

I brought up my problem regarding new text books to the teacher who quietly drifted out of the class (though in an awkward manner). After getting "buy new ones; the bundle will have to wait a few days," I returned to my seat.

Other classmates left one by one with their friends, perhaps they plan to shop before head home, or complain about the class distribution.

Sigh… I don't even know anywhere to go; I have yet to establish a life-enriching environment.

…… But shouldn't there be a special encounter on the first day in a city school?? With resolve no one can see, I sat in the class, resting my head on one hand and effectively radiating a melancholic air.

…… Not a single soul in the room, and neither were there people who left

their things in the class.

Rather than feeling empty, I felt more dejected. I will never let people know that I've done something like this.

I stood to leave the class, prepared to recreate my old room in my new home. I walked properly through the empty hall, despite of my desire to lie down and monopolize the dusk sun shining on the floor; I have yet to give up on all aspects in life. From the shoe locker devoid of love or duel letters, I took out my shoes and headed toward what looked like a bicycle parking lot made of temporary homes[25].

The only thoughts in my head as I lazily walked over were about the warmth of sunlight and such.

Fortune tends to flee like wild animals when it smells the expectation of a human being.

… At that time, it must have been the lack of expectation that allowed me to pinch the tail of fortune!

In the lot, I met eyes with the owner of the bike next to mine; our eyes clashed, like bowling ball to pins. We each froze and waited for the other to look away – the air between us distorted.

The rust on my bike scattered as breeze passed by, taking the role of fireworks and sprinkled in the air.

"Yo! Transfer~ student!"

She has a hair of cute, wavy hair (I arbitrarily categorized the hair that is wavier, softer, and more importantly, cuter to the same as the curly hair of old woman. There are so many types, I just can't remember them), and a wool sweater with sleeves enough to cover half her hands. Just when was this encounter with a girl foreshadowed today? In just a second, my lung stopped moving.

Talking with a city girl, the country boy flustered… This is bad!

If she knew I'm a transfer student, we must be in the same class.

"What kind of pronunciation is that? It's like ordering me to transfer in a different dialect."

Anyway, I have to respond in a wacky way that would least repulse the other person.

"Pff!" In the moment of what seemed to be her slip of laughter, we were

finally able to relax. Our locked gaze was released and we returned to our casual attitude.

I was so relaxed! She seems the type that spreads a calming aura. Since a long time ago, I've always liked girls with brown or blonde-dyed hair – including this girl in front of me.

I tapped away at my mind-calculator, tallying the total amount of Youth-points increase in my little world.

"Whassup with the mystery? You are Niwa-kun, right?"

"Yeah, and you are… Catha…"

"Me? I am Ryuu…ko, Mifune Ryuuko."

Though her hesitation seemed esoteric, I still accepted the lady's name.

Ryuuko, Ryuuko[26]. I see, then her name should be Ryuuko (流虎)! How's that? Though it does sound like an acronym for an Out-of-body experience[27].

"Oh yea! Didn't you call me something else?"

"Nope, nothing."

"Well, I'm not Catherine nor Jackson~"

Hahah ~ Mifune-san smiled candidly while I chuckled dryly.

As she unlatched the lock on her bike, she continued talking with me:

"So, where did ya move to?"

"Hm, it's hard to describe! I haven't explored the town enough."

"Really~? Just a general direction would do~"

She asked me to imitate the role of a compass. I really want to reply her smile, but I am just a literary boy who doesn't know north from south.

As a person who doesn't know which side the sun rises from, I live my life hazily as if in a forest.

"Ah!" Right, I still have one thing. Though it has stuff like teleportation point written on it, I hope she can turn a blind eye. "My house is where the star symbol is."

I ripped out the map stuck on the bicycle basket and handed it to Mifune-san. "Ah, I don't have a free hand~" I feel guilty: she was just about to get her bike out, and now she is in complete disarray.

"Uu… Ugu~" Perhaps due to her confusion, Mifune-san held the map with her mouth, franticly turning her eyes read the paper. Rather than a beauty making an ugly face, it was more like a beauty casually showing off an unsightly expression. Nice, as expected of the city.

Being able to talk insouciantly with a girl like this, I couldn't help but wonder if I squandered away three weeks' worth of luck. Could this be the opposite of yesterday's terrible fortune? That'd be great.

"Hmmm, mmm~"

She seemed to comprehend it, nodding her heads between what sounded like lines of a toothless person. Since she stopped making the silly face, I assumed that she was done and drew the paper from her mouth. "Pwah!" Her breath and the way her tongue stuck out – virtuous perversion (Isn't that an oxymoron?).

Of course, the balm on her lips slightly moistened the paper's edge. It may even be saliva, but so what? So what if it was? I guess I'll preserve it.

How can the clueless me ever lose the important map given by my aunt?

"Mmm~ let's see~"

"Yep, yep." I answered arbitrarily. Like I said, I'm a guy who doesn't listen to people… (ignore rant).

"We share the same route home from here, all the way to the crossroad at the train station!"

"Really~" I stuck my chin up cockily, despite not having a clue of what she said. Like I said, my grade is (ignore).

"Anyhow, we are now com~rades~!"

"Come~aid!" What does that mean again? I realized Mifune-san meant comrades after a bit of thinking.

"In that case, why don't we go halfway there together? It'd be like hanging out after school!"

"Com~rades (sure)!"

Everything is going where I am.

"But, why me? No, I mean, this is great, I don't mind at all." I returned to my senses; I am aware that I do not have the quality to mesmerize people on the first meeting.

"Mmm~" Mifune-chi (A nickname I just thought of, probably something no one would use) pressed her index finger (with brown nail polish) on her lips and groaned:

"If you go home alone, wouldn't it be embarrassing if rumors about you not having friends starts to spread?"

"Why, thank you for the concern." How tear-jerking. If she were a dude, I would probably spray him with rust dust for her nosiness.

I followed Mifune-san out with my rusty ride. Honestly, nothing sounds better than leaving this scrap metal here and steal one of those bicycles parked there.

Looking forward, I saw Mifune-san making a preparation no other high schoolers would do.

"What's that...?" I asked without thinking.

The transportation responsible for bring her around doesn't appear to be a motorcycle. If anything, it looks like a human-powered bicycle. Naturally, Mifune-san took out from the basket a helmet – an artifact that high schoolers, nay, grade schoolers have long abandoned.

"Mm?" She looked back and squealed an adorable response: "This is a safety helm. It's ouchie if you fall!"

She lightly put on the hard-hat like object and adjusted the belt. People from my old school's Bicycle Club also wore helmet and kneepads, but there is a decisive difference between this and that. What is this discrepancy? The outpouring substance of cuteness? Her helmet seems to match with her hair style, but what about about hat hair?

"Now I don't have to worry about hurting my head or hair… Helmet, equiped!"

She shook the helmet's side with her tiny hands to check the tightness, and asked me with an abashed smile:

"Niwa-kun, are you going to leave your head in the nude?"

"Normally, no one would associate head with nudity."

Besides, it was an obvious attempt to rhyme. But I didn't make a big deal out of it.

"My friends don't wear helmet either, but it's so scary. Bicycles are kind of fast… Well, my friends are…"

Mifune-san mumbled a few complaints. Her every move is just flawless. As I thought, a person born with good qualities are able to effortlessly bring ideal and reality together.

"Well, it's not like I ride fast!" I jumped onto my bike and began chasing Mifune-san's skirt. [28]

I gracefully stuck my finger out to press the bell, but with the possibility of a second or third insect platoon inside, I gave up on the reckless act and instead brushed my bangs.

Mifune-san isn't short, but the height difference between us still means that she has to look up to me. The pimple on my forehead is really bugging me. What if she sees it~? Keep in mind, I *am* an adolescent boy.

I almost lowered the standard for the Youth-Point scoring guide.

"Really? I'm super fast though. I hopecha don't mind the dust then~"

A smug that could never upset her opponent.

"Even if you say that, I can't go any faster."

"C'mon, just do it~ Come on~!"

The wheels spun smoothly, and Mifune-san pointed next to herself:

"Come here~ let's talk!"

The power of a girl's natural expression blooming into a radiant smile is just as effective as a right hook after three jabs.

Even if I lose my pride and masculanity right here, nothing beside a room modeling a devastated world (Not my business, but why do authors always imagine a destroyed future? Stuff like world-domineering computer losing control, meteor-induced climate change or great wars between human, etc is just too depressing) and a futon cousin who temps people to pour cold tea onto her head await me if I ditch Mifune-san and go straight home.

I, Niwa Makoto, have zero experience when it comes to being hit on. I can't resist, and so I dumbly followed her.

☆

"Ahahah! You're the best! Awesome~!"

"Ahahah~ Hold up, dammit!" Just as she said, I couldn't catch up.

Mifune-san's delicate legs didn't bulge twice as big; neither was she stomping to crush the pedals. In fact, she was quite composed. It's impressive

how she didn't fall.

A madly-cycling idiot chased a construction helmet-wearing girl. I guess bicycling is, in a way, similar to a three-legged race. If one person gives up, the other would have too. The pedals whirled like a hand mixer, yet the most crucial part – the wheels – spun slower than the brain of a dead cow. I know you are a rusty piece of junk, but you aren't dead yet! Stand up!

Perhaps her first time surpassing anyone else, the girl teased me ceaselessly. An eleventh grader drenched in sweat chasing a girl to see her teasing face, but let's not delve in too deeply. I don't want to open the door to that world.[29] Students from our school stared at our commotion (percentage-wise, about 80% Mifune's doing). There may be some reaction in the class tomorrow. Since when have I ascended to the level of a potential protagonist?

But my Youth-Points remained negative.

I'm having a blast, but I still feel unnerved. Please, I don't want to be picked on for this!

Anyway, what the hell is wrong with this bicycle?! I'm pedaling super hard, but the speed is the same as this morning's; it's starting to feel like a parting time job. "The wage is the same for those hard-working, and those hardly working" the cocky bicycle seems to say.

We stopped at the third traffic light after crossing the bridge, and I finally caught up to Mifune-san. The previous lights were very observant, in a way, as they didn't dare to stop the girl, being the pro-cute girl-ist they were.

"Good job~ But ya seem really tired!"

"Just… a little…!" It isn't if I can see the side of your smiling face.

"One day, this will definitely make a great memory~!" She spread her arms freely and leaned back.

… So this must be puberty, I glanced at her body and thought. As of what I mean, you are welcome to interpret. Is this what the city really is? Since earlier, Mifune-san's been talking louder to avoid being covered by the sounds of passing cars.

"……."

City is definitely different than the country. Though the cars are pretty much the same ones, I could only surrender to the car-wave assault in front of me. Just from seeing so many people is enough to give me experience possible only overseas.

“But that's a pretty amazing bike. Is it custom made?”

She poked at the bike's basket, as if asking where this thing came from.

“I don't think there is a market demand for professional garbage making...”

Amateurs can try making these too, in a sense. Just charge into a river and voila. Even shiny bicycles gifted by dads to celebrate graduation can't withstand the damage.

Seawater would likely give similar result, but those environmentalist probably won't be too happy.

“Ah, um...” Mifune-san sounded reluctant when she changed topic.

“Hm? What's up?”

She straightened her back, placing both hands on her thighs.

“Y'see… I don't actually need to cross this street.”

“Ah… Oh. I see.” She did say her house is on the way to mine, but I forgot to where.

“I live over there.” Mifune-san pointed to the left. Dizzying amount of cars and white buildings on the sides drew out the scenery. A similar sight fanned to the right as well. **Symmetry**. Yep, I'm at the age to use words that I don't fully understand.

“We hafta say bye here!”

“Seriously!?”

“But we didn't even get to talk on the way~!” Puu! Sounds like she could burst out in laughter anytime.

“Hah… Hah...” I heaved heavily, leaning onto the bicycle's handlebars.

“Besides, ya don't look so good!”

“…. Haah~ Haahh~” I am definitely not trying to sniff her.

“Oh well, I guess I'll have to wait till tomorrow!”

“… Cough, cough!” I choked for some other reasons. Is this what the city really is?

Ring ring, Mifune-san rung the bell twice. Following the sound, I looked up to stare. “Mm~ mm~ Oh!” But the girl only looked around as if searching for something. “Gimme a sec.” She seemed to have located her target and jogged

away after shoving the bicycle's handlebars into my hands.

I thought about switching our bikes and leaving for home, for the sake of her own youth development. But I quickly recalculated: time spent with a girl is *way* more precious than a stupid bike.

The traffic light turned green, as if mocking me who waited there. Just then, as if by some meticulous calculation, a familiar person deftly crossed the streets – the girl sitting next to me in class whom I have observed quite closely. Of course, she didn't look this way. Probably doesn't know my face either.

When Mifune-san returned, the traffic light had turned yellow. She was probably looking for a vending machine earlier, what a great girl.

"Here ya go." She handed over a drink.

"Thanks!" I grabbed the can.

"I thought you'd like Oolong tea, from how you looked. Ya like it?"

"Well~ Not as much as coke, but its good." Then Mifune-san must likes orange juice! She does look very sweet.

By the way, she took the drink money without missing a cent. What a clever and able girl. (← starting to become blind)

"Only a hundred and ten yen for a drink! Too bad ya don't see those vending machines anymore!"

We chugged the drink simultaneously. No one played food taster. The slight bitterness of Oolong tinged my throat, piquing a refreshing pleasure. Memory of misreading a light novel title as Oolong-gosou came rushing back into my brain.[30]

"Puwahh~!" Mifune-san downed her drink and took a satisfying breath. She kept staring at me as she groomed the hair outside of her helmet. Just a little, my heartbeat raised.

"So, why did ya transfer here?"

"I'll give you a hint: do you think there's some romantic reason?"

I answered with a question. "Uu~" The tolerant girl earnestly thought about it. Ding! A light bulb popped out, and she answered vigorously:

"You were a notorious delinquent who did something terrible in your last school!"

"Then would we still be talking right now?"

"Yeah, you're right~" She grinned. The drinks were finished by now.

"My parents are working overseas, so they sent me to my aunt's."

"Wow, that sounds great~" A scenario all girls look forward to made Mifune-san's eyes glitter.

"I know, right? I think so too… Scratch that, I *thought* so."

I looked away, eyes following the cars that seem to pursue the Mercedes ahead.

And so I successfully avoided the trauma from the repercussion of last night.

"Ah, the light's green."

Mifune-san reported. I don't remember how many green lights it has been since the tall girl passed. However, the short time we spent here is all about quality over quantity.

"Well, it's about time for me to head home anyway!" To be honest, I want to talk to her for another hour.

"Um…"

"?"

Mifune-san tipped on her toes slightly: "Niwa-kun!"

"Hm?"

"I hope you make lottsa friends!"

"Hahahahah." What are you, my sister?

"Get along with everyone~ Oh!" With toes still tipped, she cheered.

"Oh~! …Oh, whatever. Oh~!"

She left after declaring something I can't agree with.

I stood and watched Mifune-san's silhouette leave. She turned back and waved her left arm; her bike wiggled left and right, looking really perilous.

She adjusted her helmet with her left hand after the bike stabilized. Evidently, she's very conscious of her hair.

After seeing her off, I feel an overdue sense of fulfillment tingling. I stretched my shoulders:

"…In any case, that's one less issue."

For the chance of saying "what a coincidence! Let's go to class together, ahahah~" to her at the bicycle lot, I decide to continue biking to school. It's final.

☆

It was still noon when I got back to Meme-san's house, because I didn't go anywhere else. It was just half over twelve, a sufficient amount of time remains till tomorrow.

I parked the bike into the storage with its imaginary lock. Rubbing my hands together, I tried to get rid of the reddish-brown powder off before going into the house. Even if the residents are people who should be censored like profanity on TV, the house they live in is still innocent! I figured I may as well keep the place clean if I'm living here.

"I've been thinking: do things have heart too?"

I had something weird as a pet in first grade. It's a bit of a complicated past that's been sealed away. It could be a touching story with a bit of wording, but I'm likely to be crushed by shame halfway through recounting.

It has to be kept secret. I opened the door.

"…I'm home~" I quietly greeted. The room desirous of movement swallowed the feeble noise; like a drop of water on gauze, it dissipated without a trace.

Meme-san was of course still working at the company (probably, but I don't even know what she does), but her daughter… Did Erio run out somewhere with her futon?

"……" The image could be part of a heartwarming anime.

I don't know the neighbors yet, but what if rumors (especially the kind people whisper) were to spread? I will be treated as the same!

I am not a cogwheel bound by the rules of society, and I refuse to follow fate! But now's not the time to work the fallow field of my mind with silly jokes. I took off my shoes and rearranged them after stepping inside.

A pair of Geta[31] sat at the entrance, and a pair of modernistic shoes a girl my generation would wear next to them.

I proceeded to the stairs through the hall. What to do for lunch? I thought as Oolong-tea swiveled at the bottom of my stomach; I don't even know where the convenient store is, and I'm just an ordinary guy who can't cook… Then

should I try the Onigiri[32] store I saw this morning?

Checking my purse, I reached the stairs. Just then, I heard noises from the living room that was untouched since yesterday. I stepped off and turned toward the living room. Could it be a thief?! If it is, would he be kind enough to clean the kitchen? Optimistic wishes popped up in my head.

Unconsciously, I hid in the shadow and peeked into the room. And so, a futon-roll (shoo, shoo, go away) sitting in the living room entered my vision. As if imitating some scientist inspector, she kneeled in front of a TV screen filled with snowy noise. What a surreal sight.

"The kosmos is mersderrected…" She muttered, quite loudly for talking to herself, at the TV. Something about the cosmos.

Ignoring her is easy, but I'm not just a hotel guest either. Let's at least try to figure out a way to live with this person!

"Hey~" A cautious call. We didn't properly introduce ourselves, and we're also the opposite gender. I have to take in consideration that she may be upset that a guy had suddenly moved in.

Futon girl twisted her body to face me. But since there's that cotton in between, I didn't think we're really interacting.

"I'm home."

"……." She remained silent, but the top of the futon moved slightly, reflecting the inner movement.

I put my pack on the table and sat down on the tatami floor in front of the futon girl. I stared at her rudely, but there's wasn't much I could ogle anyway.

She changed from pajama to long-sleeved shirt and square-pattern skirts, something semblance of a messily-worn school uniform.

…. Though I tried to speak, what should I ask? I need an inspiration for topics… I know, I'll try what I did at school!

"Oh, my name is Niwa Makoto. We are cousins. Pleased to meet you."

An introduction on our second meeting. Just like in a classroom, we'll start with this!

"Earff is in denner."

"Huh?" Her answer was obviously not 'pleased to meet you.'

Once again, the girl with cotton in her mouth spoke unclearly. This time, I

understood what she said:

"Uh, so Earth is in danger….. Is it?"

Aren't the people polluting this planet already a threat to Earth?

Perhaps as retaliation to my lackluster response, she extended out her right hand from below the futon, grabbed the remote and dialed the volume up. White noise swarmed, so did a feeling of brow-frowning discomfort in my head.

"I get it, I get it. I don't know what to get, but I get it. Forget about the cosmos, just drop the remote."

I reached for the remote, but she dexterously blocked me with her futon body. But since she lowered the volume, my words were not unheard.

As the wobbly futon girl sat down, I asked the long-overdue question; this is something I find difficult to ask Meme-san:

"One question: are you really my cousin? Meme-san's daughter? Is it true?"

I said one question, but it's more like a sentence full of questions meant to suffocate this stifled-looking person.

"….Kousin…"

Futon-girl relaxed her kneeling legs and mumbled. 'Kousin' sounds like you're talking to someone else!

"Child of the serbling of parents – neese. Also yused merterphorically with people of approximate who are not related by blood. Example: 'The guy in front of me resembles a Tardigrade[33] kousin.'"

"Don't insult people while pretending to be a dictionary." I understood the muffled speech, maybe because I'm getting used to it.

And you haven't even seen my face...

Neither have I her. I'm not disinterested, since people in manga tend to be rather beautiful.

In reality, however, only people with ulterior motives will try to hide their intent.

"What else? You seem to be avoiding my questions."

Then I'll ask you with my fists! Just kidding. I'm not curious enough to use violence, but what's important is the fact that this thing lives with me.

The futon girl doesn't seem to have much to say though. Sigh, fine.

"Anyway, I'll be a guest here for a while, meaning we'll be living together."

I want to see her reaction, so I stepped down and explained.

"….Oo…Oo……..Oo…."

Futon girl whispered something, but under the TV noise and her muffler, it's quite unclear. I wanted to turn off the TV, so I stood to grab the remote place on the table.

Probably detecting my movement, the Futon girl hid the remote in her body with unexpected speed. I clawed at the air, wondering if I should just beat the remote out of her. But harassing someone whose face I don't even know doesn't seem like a good idea, so I stopped.

Even if we are acquaintances, the punishment and despise I would get for touching a girl's body wouldn't be any different.

"What are you doing?" I asked without letting the screen into my sight.

"Awaiting for a telerportation from Spaes."

"…. Are you ok upstairs?" I finally expressed freely the concerns a relative should have.

"Lerng range telerportation compleet. ETA T minus onehundredandtwentyseven seconds."

"Uh?" A hundredandtwentyseven seconds…. Two minutes and seven seconds? She's just making this up!

As expected, thirty seconds after she said it, the so called "teleportation" is complete. Looks like the aliens have quite the earthly manner, ringing the doorbell. From the futon girl's reaction, that's what she's being waiting for.

"It hasn't even been a minute!"

"The report was inaccurate. Unfortunately, the result must be recalculated."

"...I'm actually happy that you answered, but are we really talking here?"

The futon girl ignored my protesting and strode out. Her steps were impeccable, as if telling me "even my ears are stuffed with cotton."

"…. I guess I should go."

Letting that person answer the door doesn't seem smart. Common sense tells me to follow her; the futon girl said nothing to her follower.

I came back to the entrance I was just at.

Perhaps the process of teleportation is carried out with man power; the door's glass distinctively mirrored the shadow of a person.

Looks like a delivery man.

"Hold it." I pulled the futon-roll back as she walked down with bare feet.

"……." I felt her strong dissatisfaction even through the sheets.

"You a cat? Don't just walk around with no shoes." I pushed her back into the hall, put on my shoes and opened the door.

Since I'm lounging here, might as well make it a habit to take care of the family.

The alien standing outside wore a green-and-white striped uniform and carried something tantalizing.

"Thanking for using ooo Pizza delivery!!" A young man who could charge people for his smile appeared.

"Huh? What pizza?"

"ooo Pizza." His pronunciation is flawless, but I couldn't comprehend.

Could he actually be...? …No way.

It mattered little, whether if he's from D*minos, P*zza Hut or Papa M*rphy.

"Thank you, enjoy!" Somehow, I ended up paying the bill.

The delivery bro didn't realize the existence of the futon girl, and dashed off on his scooter. Those are so good; my bike just kinda drains its user.

Close the door, lock it. Arrange the slippers nice and neatly, put my wallet back.

What remains in my hands is a bacon and onion pizza, German style, size small. One thousand and four hundred yen.

"The kousin's evaluation score raises to two on the x axis."

"Mm..." Summarizing it wasn't easy, but to put it simply, she meant 'thanks?'

"Speaking of, the universe is pretty small! We have something like this in the country too!"

"The universe is hermernity's clersest hope."

"Wha? The universe is humanity's closest hope? Can't you just give me a straight answer??"

Futon girl didn't heed to me, simply returning to the room holding on to the pizza box. I followed mindlessly. She appears familiar with the way of her house, carefully dodging the cabinet and vase placed in the hallway without tripping on or breaking anything.

We walked into the living room and, for some reason, sat next to each other. Normally sitting next to a girl in public places would be embarrassing enough to skyrocket my pulse and heartbeat – a sign of imminent Youth-Points — but sitting next to a mattress just makes me sleepy. I'd like to hug it, but I am not about to commit a crime. I'm serious, she was just a futon! No one is gonna listen to an excuse like this — even if it's true!

She wiggled in the futon and found four hundred yen in coins and a wrinkled thousand yen bill. With an arm that could barely move above the wrist, she handed the money to the middle of nowhere. Seems like the crazy girl still know the concept of money.

At least knowing how to order deliveries places her closer to being social animals.

"Thanks."

I took the money and put it back to my wallet. All right, my mission and screen time is over. Should I just head back to the second floor? Looking at others eat may reveal how deprived young people look nowadays... But I do want to see how she eats.

Even if everything out of her mouth is space-related, I know she actually likes gravity. There is no way she would eat with the futon on. In other words, she will take off her cover.

This is an opportunity to steal a peek of her face; curiosity fixed my feet on the ground.

I'm too hungry to even ask "why do you dress like that?"

Futon-girl opened the box. Aroma of the pizza intensified, exacerbating the growling of my stomach. Maybe I'll call a pizza too? Hunger demanded so, but after considering the price, the thinking bits rejected the notion. Someone who doesn't work just can't afford to spend a penny.

She grabbed a corner of the pizza with two hands. Still clothed with futon,

she kept the look of a tube.

"Huh?" She ripped the pizza in half and tossed it into the front of the futon. A hole in one.

"……." This is the first time I've ever opened my eyes so wide in silence for something so outrageously negative.

I was shocked and wordless, impressed yet confounded. I couldn't pretend that I didn't see something that looked like it came straight from a circus.

Like the ball toss game on field days, toppings falling off the pizza made a mess of the futon. Eventually, the pizza flew toward the mouth of Erio. Does it taste good without half the ingredient? Her ridiculous way of eating even sparked some nonsensical concerns on my part.

I tried imagining the inside of the futon; a disgusting picture terrified me.

She put the other half of the pizza back, probably meaning that she's not eating it.

"What about the rest?" Though there is a mountain of questions, hunger isn't losing out either.

"Based on the Kousin's evaluation, he can have it."

She seemed to say "go ahead." What a great development. I already decided to ignore whatever happened in the futon.

"Then we'll split the money!" I shoved seven hundred yen into he dangling hand.

"…." Whoa. Holding her hand, I realized this *is* a girl.

Her pale and slender fingers were like five silver fishes.

Her faintly warm finger tips had a softness like a premium cake dough, warping around my skin. I felt as if the hand would simply melt if I keep holding on to it.

Since I know no one would do it, I cleaned the kitchen. After that, I went and unpacked two of my luggage. Just a bit after seven, the phone rang.

The neighboring Futon girl remained motionless on her ball chair, so I rushed downstairs. Not only do I have to help with expenses, I have to pick up the phone too.

"Hello, Niwa residence."

"Oh my, you are home already? But I made reservation for our crystal

anniversary!”

“Good luck on your golden anniversary then.”[34]

“Didn't you say Niwa residence? How else could that be unless we're married?”

“Oh… That's right.” I should have said Touwa residence: “Sorry, my bad.” Kadda.

I hung up. But the demon returned. Like human history, the ringing repeated itself.

“Shin-chan, you are terrible~” Needless to say, the person nagging me with the cutesy voice was none other than Meme-san.

“Shin-chan?! That sounds like Cr*yon Shin-chan, don't call me that!”

“But you were just like him when you were a kid”

“Yeah, right! I don't even think we've met before!”

“We met in the hospital when you were born.”

“Good to know! ...So what do you need?”

“Did you have dinner yet?”

“Nope.”

“I can't go home yet, so dinner's up to you.”

“Got it. What about your daughter?”

“Well… I don't know, but you should just pretend she doesn't exist.”

“I can't do that!” I tapped with my toes loudly.

I looked away. Night enveloped the sky outside; in contrast, lights from the residences shone brightly. Perhaps because of the incorrect space or angle, the moon was invisible.

“Then it's up to you! I don't care anymore~”

Her sense of responsibility is as palpable as helium.

“… Are you really her mother?”

I asked the response-less telephone. To be frank, what exactly happened if there is a daughter that no one in the family knew about? If she's letting me stay, my aunt probably doesn't mean to hide her forever.

One more mystery lingered in my mind; I rested the handset. Something I

don't care about may just end up giving me insomnia tonight. I slouched in dejection.

I went upstairs to grab my wallet, visiting my cousin's room on the way.

"Hey, um..." What do I call her? She seems to have named me the cousin, but what about me? Calling my cousin by her last name is weird too.

"What are we eating for dinner? Ah, what do you usually get?"

Without using any subject nouns, I asked. We'll discuss about that later.

The cousin-and-futon half-buried in the ball chair stood up steadily. I want to try sitting on that too if I have the chance.

"Userlly nutrient from spaes that can pervide ample energy for night operation."

The transcribed sentence would be "Usually nutrient from space that can provide ample energy for night operation."

"So you insist that pizza is space food, huh…?" Fine, I'll pretend its space pizza!

She still smelled like pizza. Why not just wash or change the futon?

"But the nutrient was divided to the cousin today. Active time has thus been shortened."

"…Oh~ You don't have dinner cuz you gave me the pizza. I get it." I could almost be a translator at this point!

The pizza is divided for lunch and dinner. That's futon-girl's daily diet. But since I ate half, she doesn't get dinner tonight.

What a nutritionally unbalanced diet. Well, I only had a variety of food because I lived with my parents, but I'm likely to stuff myself with junk food if I live like the futon-girl (I deliberately didn't describe her with this particular word).[35]

"Then we'll cook..." I swallowed the dumb question back halfway. Doesn't Erio-san emits an aura that says "I only know how to sleep"? Her sense of fashion says just that. The only thing I can't win against her is her unique style.

Thought I still can't deny that she isn't exactly dignified as a human being.

"Want me to get something for ya, Nee-san?"

I tried laying low, before anything worse happens.

Something tells me the terrible development that is being forced to go outside with this futon ball awaits me if I don't say anything. It's a sort of six sense – an omen, even. Like mother, like daughter.

"The kousin has yet to pass everluation – it is unknern whether he could pervide satisferctory results."

See? I knew it.

After translation, I think she definitely meant "I'm going too."

The refreshing night breeze blew over my shoulder.

Passion and freedom filled my chest, as I looked up at the waxing moon.

Yet obstacles (and pedestrians) were plenty on the night street.

As expected of the city.

Ahhh~ They're all looking. Everyone's staring. My dark history is growing by the second… They wouldn't think I'm out to dispose a dead body, right?

I want to immerse myself in the atmosphere of a night walk, but the object in front of me would always drag me back into reality.

The futon-girl who sat butt-in in the basket, feet swaying, is not a pleasant sight.

We'll definitely be lectured by some dedicated policemen if we keep riding the way we are. Riding double isn't trending anymore, but for her, it must be a rare occurrence.

Her reaction was the same as a kindergartener making a racket on a shopping cart.

I'd like to hope that I'd be mistaken for a mattress deliveryman, but the futon-girl simply doesn't have the technique or ability to retract her legs. How should I put it? it's pretty damn hard to ride the bike, especially not being able to see the front; I couldn't see without tilting my head. Things were looking bleak as the bicycle's center of mass changed and the wheels started to tremble.

The thing that should be dealt first is that futon, but she was stubborn to not take it off. I tried to rip it off before heading out, but she ran away; looking at her struggling on the floor somehow made me feel guilty. I did help her up, but I lost a point on the X axis.

I lost two Youth-points too, so we'll call it even.

But since I don't know where the convenient store is, I needed to

compromise with her.

Besides, since we went outside, the futon-girl's rate of tripping increased exponentially. Her maneuverability seems to only apply in the domain of her home; even walking on flat ground proved impossible without falling. The plan of walking to get food was thus discontinued, and we switched to using a bike.

This is a Itasha (not mentally, but physically painful). This would be the second headache today.[36]

Though she gave out some vague hints to my crude road report, we still managed to reach the closest store before bumping into any policemen. In any case, anyone could tell her innocuity, despite appearing suspicious. For example, she won't be able to tell the direction or keep herself balanced if she wants to catch someone. If this was an RPG, she'd be a monster that gives one exp.

"Here we are… What should we get~?"

I want to stick my face to the window and ogle at the things inside, but since I'm in the city, and I care about morality and shame, I gave up on the thought. Also, I didn't actually want to do any of that.

Clank, clank. The protest of "don't leave me here" in the sound of ankles kicking the basket came from behind me. She may be dense in terms of reading the atmosphere, but her hearing is pretty sharp.

"You have to take that thing off if you want to come in. I won't let you go in like that."

Though not as intimidating as a person wearing motorcycle helmet, the futon-girl would still rouse some sort of fear in human beings. Maybe a collective body of cotton, from afar.

"As a secernd-rate envestigator, I must not reveal my identerty to the public, for it may affect the intergrity of the everluation."

"Is that so? I admire your professionalism, so just stay there and be good!"

"But aderptability is also the prerf of a first-rate enverstigator."

"Oh~? So in other words..." I looked back with slightly malicious eyes and listened to her plea.

"Hernce, I must extract my posterior from the bersket." Are you the giant turnip from a certain folklore?

I originally wanted to play tug of war with her legs, but considering her being a girl, I princess-carried her out. I rested her legs on the parking lot's asphalt ground, releasing her only when she regained balance. I genuinely felt that her legs, not just her fingers, were that of a girl's.

Then, as if trying to become a human compressed-image, she struggled in the little space inside of the futon trying to untied the clothesline. She almost tipped backward because of her arms' awkward angle.

"You could have just asked for help."

I couldn't stand to watch. Does she go through this much hassle everyday to tie herself up?

I released the tightly wrapped rope. Futon-girl, A.k.a Touwa Erio finally reveals her true form under the night sky and the light of the convenient store.

Even though I have no interest, I gawked at her face.

"….."

My first impression was…

She looks like an extraterrestrial creature.

"What are you? Alien? A princess in bamboo?"

Anxiety washed over my mind, wavering it. I don't know if I finished the sentence without stuttering. Blood vessels pulsed under my wrist, rendering me breathless, and my eyes bleared.

Touwa Erio without her futon is an alien… Oh, I mean alien in comparison to how I look.

If I'm Earth, then she is celestial.

The stock for Touwa Erio exploded in my mind, like witnessing Kaguya-hime[37] being born from a Durian.

An unbelievably beautiful girl born from that unbelievable aunt stood there.

Amazing. Her hair was emitting particles; that's not the hair of an earthling.

Her hair can absorb even dandruff! I won't go as far as saying that. But even the bits of dry pizza ingredients were nullified by it.

"Alien…?"

"Hm?"

Erio widened her eyes to my reflexive comment. What's the matter?

I don't mean anything else: its just to describe her as a different entity. But this may be what she likes to hear.

Erio strode forward, but her right foot tripped on her left.

"Me…? I… I am an alien!"

She closed her distance with wobbling steps, grabbing onto my upper arms before regaining her balance. Her nails stabbed into my flesh, bringing a nonnegligible pain.

"What are you – hey!"

I nudged Erio away and stepped back; she followed.

The reason being our hands.

I let go of her hands and cast my head aside, glancing sideways at Erio.

She loosened her fists, despite her heavy breathing.

As if to calm herself down, she caressed her eyelids and muttered:

"This is the facade I use to avoid attention." She nonchalantly described herself, looking away.

A voice as clear as the ring of a triangle, proving herself to be a girl. Shock settled in, but I still couldn't look at her.

"It doesn't seem to work very well!" I answered without looking. If someone of my gender hears this, he'll definitely beat me up.

Probably because of being relieved from a stifled condition, Erio ignored my dissent, and took another deep breath. I somehow remembered the times during middle school, when bullies shoved their victim under sheets of cushion and sat on top. Though I wasn't involved.

The reason being that Erio looks like a bullied kid, despite having a ray-emitting appearance. What should I do? If I ditch her, I'd feel pretty guilty… Well, frankly speaking, I won't deny having ulterior motives such as casually interacting with girls.

"….."

I wanted to at least get rid of the crumbs on her hair, and sifted my finger through the strands to clean them. The dehydrated pieces separated from the hair, falling like dirt.

My fingers felt tingly, and they shook slightly. Wuah, I'm nervous. I mockingly assessed, trying to calm myself. Not that it worked.

It's not like I've never touched a girl, but this is the first time my fingers have felt a beautiful girl.

And so my torso was so stiff to the point that it might hurt later.

Erio let me groomed her hair, all while staring into my eyeballs. It was kinda unsettling.

Thanks to that, my nervousness receded. My shoulders relaxed, and my breath eased.

I took my finger back to see there are particles there, only to see the remains of bacon. I dust them off and awaited for Erio's reaction.

"….." Silence. She poked at her ribs, as if wanting to say something. Even I'm hesitant to speak fist.

Her presence even made me lose the words I had in mind.

I didn't want to break the silence; I wanted to be engrossed in the view.

She isn't the banal, adorable type: she has the exotic beauty of an untouchable art.

Thanks to the futon she held with her right hand, I could at least keep her in my sight.

"I plan to unveil my secret to the cousin, for you have the potential."

She finally spoke, and with varying pitch and eye movement, looked much more human. The monocular view finally developed into a binocular one.

"Mm… What kind of secret?"

Since she showed me her face, she must trust me to to some degree. However, I don't want to know you.

Feels like I will be brought to a different universe.

Erio flicked her greasy hair, expressionlessly but solemnly declared:

"The Earth is in danger."

"I've heard of this one!" How come she knows about stuff like this?! Aren't we the same age?

Not again. *This* is your secret? This is worse than compromised national security… If it was *real*.

Of course, I won't seriously consider it. Aliens are losing their habitats because of human's technological advancement.

Occasionally, I'll meet with one of these people, who believe that highly-civilized aliens have already integrated themselves into human society. Right... Is that so?

Do these people want to live like they did during the Muromachi-jidai?[38]

No. Ridiculous.

I can't admire theories on mysteries that are too close to the daily life.

Alien may exist, but where are they?

… Sigh. This is the thought of a dreamless, half-baked and pretentious philosopher: me.

A dead-serious Miss Cousin began chattering, with more vigor and color than ever before:

"I'm a conciliatory investigator of alien origin. My assignment is to evaluate the citizens of both this city and Earth, and to erase the trace of any alien contact. There is also a testing ground for aliens to break free off of earth's gravitational field."

The night wind swallowed her hysterical cry. The particles from her hair also ceased to emit.

This must be God's punishment, I thought.

It must be a penalty imposed on her for her out-of-worldly appearance.

This is exactly what I meant by over-anticipation.

Everything she's been saying has been neatly put into a single phrase.

Then I'll say it out loud!

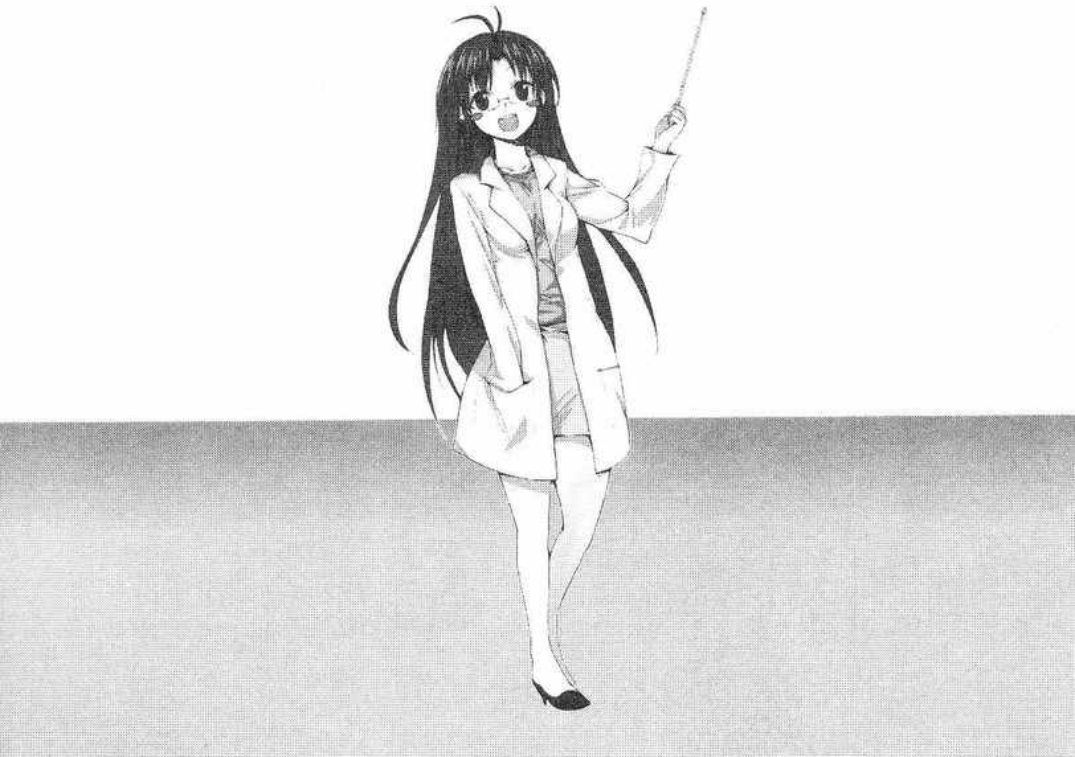
No B.S, I'll say it! One, two… three!

"...Is that so?"

And so, I met Touwa Erio.

- 独り暮らしの夢、簀巻き女によって潰える。 −2
- 引っ越し初日の夜、眠らないのに悪夢を見せつけられる。 −3
- 晴れた日に、朝練を学校の外から眺める。 +1
- 自転車置き場で御船さんと会話、そして一緒に下校。
  追いかけっこしたり、ジュース飲んだり、
  転校初日という条件含む合わせ技。 +2
- 簀巻き女の手に触れて、ボーイミーツガール的なアレ。 +1
- 簀巻き女を自転車の籠に入れて、夜の町を行く。 −2
- 藤和エリオの素顔を知る。 +3
- 藤和エリオの言動を知る。 −4

現在の青春ポイント合計 −9



- Dream of independent life ruined by futon-girl: -2
- Witnessed a nightmare on the first day of moving in: -3
- Seeing a morning practice on a sunny day: +1
- The combination of going home, drinking and riding with Mifune-san: +2
- Touching futon-girl's hand, the feeling of a boy-meets-girl scenario: +1
- Riding with futon-girl in the basket during the night: -2
- Seeing Touwa Erio's: + 3
- Hearing Touwa Erio: -4

Youth-Point Total: -9

三章『自問・ババ抜きでジョーカーが三枚手札にあったらどうしよう編』

Chapter Three - "Question to self: What if I got three jokers on hand during a game of Old Maid?"

New morning, new high school. On the second day, I arrived extra early.

The empty lot still looked like a simple temporary house with interspersed bikes. It almost looked as if people just abandoned their bikes and parked haphazardly. Since I can park wherever, I picked the spot next to the storage; that way, I can leave easily when bikes fill the place later. Of course, I left it unchained. Thieves have eyes: they'll want a different bike.

Speaking of locks, I don't even have the key to Meme-san's house. Erio even told me she often goes out during daytime. That's not good. I'll have to apply for one when I get home!

After shoving some books that I might need into the back pack, I dragged dutifully from school->shoe locker->stairs->classroom. If there's a way to skip a step, please teach me.

I pulled open the class door; the screeching noise reverberated in the hall, and I cringed. Perhaps lacking the innate skin humidifier of a human being, the room was filled with dry air. The same kind that is left in your room few days after a trip.

Walking in, I saw two people in the class already. One was a guy, sleeping on his desk – probably how he spends his lunch time. He sat by the window, meaning he's behind me in the last name order.

The other was my neighbor; her name should be Maekawa-san. Back hunched, she rested her cheek on one arm. Her hair swayed every now and then – man, she doesn't look very reliable~ I commented as I drifted to my seat.

As I pulled the seat out, Maekawa-san's side face became a straight-on portrait. She stared at me; her eyes weren't scary today. Maybe she's near-sighted and didn't wear her contacts yesterday.

I traded looks with this girl who's taller than me when sitting down. As a whole, she gave the impression of an oarfish. Despite looking beautiful underwater, there's just something disappointing about them when viewing up close... She belongs in the art category.

Maekawa-san seemed to also realize that gazes can't communicate, or maybe she thought this was the time to make the next move. Her first broadcast came from her lips:

"Transfer student." Without verbs or adjectives, she finished her speech with a slightly coarse voice.

"Which makes you 'student.'"

"Hm, I've been here for two years." She took out her student ID, the proof of her status.

"Well... We *are* in the same grade — even the same class!"

"I know." Of course we are, she seemed to say.

She gave a little frown. That should be my expression! I put up a contending stance.

"....."

"....."

The conversation ended. Not abruptly, but gradually faded away.

Since the second story was in complete silence, even shallow words like these were enough to excite the mind. I opened the back pack I didn't have to, peeked inside to alleviate the boredom.

"...Ah." Since I don't have my books yet, I'll ask Maekwa-san to lend me one. I could just ask the Tanizawa guy behind me, but I'm also not a man with a noble soul.

In the end, the backpack remained untouched, hanging by the desk.

"....."

I gazed at the clock above the blackboard. About half a circle away from homeroom.

So just why did I leave so early?

Question — from me.

Answer — from me. You're welcome.

It's because Erio was home!

I recalled what happened after I denounced her "duty."

Below is a memory too recent to be the past.

"The world exists in a polygonal box; a higher existence observes the known universe. These entities see us as a form of entertainment, and thus, they entered fragments of the truth into the minds of normal human beings.

Speaking strictly from the results, these people are bound with conditions similar to dementia, and are exiled in order to suppress the dissemination of truth. Just as the word suggests, they are erased from the world. Even the observers cannot predict the technology humanity used to cross the parallel worlds."

"Really, now."

"In addition, there are traces of human experimentation. They observe the direction in which human souls adhere to, and arbitrarily create realms as abodes for these souls. There are even rumors that they have been evaluating the reactions of humans when given a new life, and comparing their view on life to those of other earthly organisms."

"Really, now."

"The Observers even used cities as testing grounds, in order to ascertain the capacity of emotional fluctuation within humans and to select the ones with superior psyche. People murdered for bounty, and the dead haunted the town as walking corpses. The situation was perilous."

"Really, now… Ow!" She smacked on my back, almost making me choke on the half-swallowed rice.

I chugged down the Oolong tea next to me to wash down the food. About a third of a bottle worth of liquid rolled into my stomach. I gave Erio a glance of "what the hell was that?" but she only nibbled away at the Okonomiyaki[39] on hand

She seems to prefer the diet of eating pizza in the morning, and Okonomiyaki at night. Don't they somehow overlap with each other? I did warn her at the convenience store, but she just ignored me.

We didn't head straight home, instead circling to a densely forested park behind the temple under Erio's command.

"Outside activity is a rare occurrence. Hence, I must carry out my duty as a blahblahblah." She explained her motivation for our detour. The rest had nothing to do with her – something about the will of the universe – so I just listened cursorily.

We sat and ate next to each other on the half-buried tires in the park. I picked the yellow one, Erio the white one; the pink one remained neglected.

I heard that parks and temples in the city are occupied by hobos… Keeping my country sense keen, I did see a few people. Since there was a mysterious girl

carrying a mattress around, some old guy even thought we ran away from home (I don't like it either, but some people even mistook us as eloped couple) and kindly offered us help. Perhaps the nearly destroyed bicycle that looked as if its been salvaged from a river bank amplified our impression.

However, when the guy carelessly asked for Erio's identity…

"Within restricted parameter combined with lowered linguistic standard, I am an **esper**."

"Wow~ Impressive!" **Super** — the simplified version of "super stupid." So you do understand! [40]

After such conversation, everybody retreated near the temple to let us alone. Seemed like they may have realized that Erio is a rather hard-to-describe individual. No, they *are* right, but I was still bothered, and want to scream some unmentionable words.

I peered up at the evening sky. Cloud hid the moon, trying to raise the night's potency. If the time was now, I might be able to say it. I looked toward the dim stars; memories of the country's sky sighed.

"Ah~ Cough, cough… So, cough, cough… I just wanna say, cough, cough… Guess not..."

Simple coughs created some breathing spaces, but somehow I sounded irk with her. Tsk!

I continued eating.

Erio bit the Okonomiyaki with Yakisoba as I stabbed at the fried-fish bento. [41]

Great atmosphere we were having during meal time… That's good, but there wasn't any opportunity for talking. I thought maybe she'd break into a rap after taking that futon off, but everything coming out just spelt chuunibyou. Even without the outer space element, every other sentences of hers pervaded delusion.[42]

"I don't comprehend the cousin's stance of ignoring my beneficial intelligence."

Like treating a neanderthal, Erio shrugged at me like an American woman. By the way, the futon she wore served now as padding. According to her, it hurt to sit because her butt wasn't too fleshy… And for some reason, her analogy involved Mars and the moon. Think about that now, why?

"We aren't exactly on the same wave length here; why not learn a thing or two from a TV…? Oh yeah, why does every channel here has something playing? The TV was on when I was unpacking, and I almost wanted to praise the city when I saw the eighth channel with a show on."

Channel five was listed under entertainment back home. Man, the eighth channel was almost pitch black – I thought maybe it was a program meant for clairvoyance training.

"Under what order is the cousin sent here?"

"The earthly order that my parents had to work elsewhere."

"Was there any interaction with the extraterrestrials in the previous settlement?"

"Nothing. The earth is quite big, y'know. No reason for them to only visit Japan."

Seems like at least in her manner, she's the same as those foreigners who adore the Yamato-damashii. But if aliens were to visit, why would they bother showing up in the middle of the sticks where I lived? Shouldn't they go see places like Kyoto instead?[43]

"A logical point." Erio assented with a rare, honest nod.

I might see particles from her hair again if I lower my guard.

"Eri… Agh. Erio." And what about her name? This is *not* for Japanese people.

I don't want the mother who named her to to have any more screen time!

"…?"

Because of my stopping halfway, Erio inquisitively tilted her head. I guess she didn't hate the idea of me calling her name, nor did she seem to think "why are disgusting people all so shameless?" with a revolted expression. And so, I asked unreservedly:

"Why do you insist on playing as an alien?"

"Because I am one."She concisely asserted.

"Alright, so am I eating dinner with an alien?" I don't believe her one bit.

"The cousin should have ascertained my identity."

"Haah?" Oh~ I *did* say that at the convenient store, but it was just figuratively speaking.

If she thought I was serious, both of us lose in a way.

"I am curious: why do you possess the galactic clairvoyance, despite of a misleading appearance?"

"Excuse me for interrupting your half-assed compliment, but it's a misunderstanding."

"…Modesty. A young man who seeks praises by relying on the Japanese virtue?"

"N—o, and you're a wacko."

Perhaps to test my honesty, Erio stared at me, making me answer awkwardly. I keep thinking that I somehow won her faith with idiotic phrases.

But is trust really a concept suitable for Erio? She *is* "**super**" after all.

Not someone of my level could deal with.

As if to end the conversation, she bit off a big chunk of the Okonomiyaki. Well, big enough to fill maybe half my mouth.

"Does the reason really matter? Oh yeah… here, for you."

As it had been sitting underneath the bento, the napkin was lukewarm, but it should be usable.

I handed the wet wipe I also bought earlier to Erio. Since she didn't have a free hand, she merely stared at me with oblivious eyes, as if telling me something, instead of taking it.

"You still got pizza on your face. Doesn't it itch? How about cleaning it?"

"…...Why?"

Erio strickenly asked, appearing apprehensive. Her reaction was not what I had expected.

"I don't even know why you asked." And take it fast, the flies are going steal my food.

"….☆☆☆☆☆☆" Erio's lips vibrated at high frequency.

"Wha? Speak up~"

I tried speaking like Mifune-san. Sometimes, the same thing done by guys just irritates people. The amount of healing was even less than sugar during war time; it was gross, but I did my best at a falsetto.

"...Um, but why?" I softened my tone of speech, but vacillated because due

to indecisiveness.

Man~ the stress is killing me! We already don't talk that much, communicating only through cringey, choppy phrases, and I'm even slower when it comes to actually doing things.

I won't tolerate things to develop at such turtle pace.

Unable to stand the pressure, I helplessly took out the wipe to clean her face and around her mouth.

With a bit of force, I rubbed around her eyelids and sides of nose. Erio let me do so without facing away.

It's like taking care of an infant. I remembered the times during a middle school kindergarten visit. Maybe that's why I don't feel nervous touching Erio's face, but then…

"I will not change your evaluation score even with bribery."

"Good for you. Someone who trusts easily or flip-flops is definitely unreliable."

Just like the disks of a Reversi game, changing to one color is as easy as to the other.

I balled up the wipe and threw it into the bag after finishing. Since I've located the park's garbage can, I'll just dispose of the trash when we head back.

Once again Erio and I used our hands and mouths for purposes other than speaking. Without a question she can eat normally, but since she already feeds in such amusing way, she probably would actually never take off the futon aside for bathing.

Must be really muggy, being sequestered in the world of futon.

A pubescent guy will definitely become a hotbed for pimples, adding more holes and scars on his skin.

"….."

I peered at Erio's profile to my content.

Her appearance is best used when eating quietly. If her mouth were taped shut, she must be able to advance in life by at least three levels.

However, she probably chose to become degenerate, so it has nothing to do with me.

From about three paces away, I inquired Erio:

“What do you during the day anyway?”

“Eradicate evidences of extraterrestrial contact. Why do you ask?”

“No, no reason.” I still added a line of “is that so?” afterward.

☆

And the night passed like that. I rewound the empty film strip of memory.

We engaged in an exchange valued at around two Youth-points. Though due to content of our conversation, about one point in fragment was scored.

I wonder if my deficit can ever be reimbursed in that household.

The guy next to the window already turned his lying head elsewhere, changing even the position of his arm. Seemed like he just wants to relax, as opposed to actually being sleepy.

It's not like the concept is foreign: during seventh grade, I've always felt that time was slow. Not because there was the lure of joy waiting ahead that every second felt like an hour, but the exact opposite – it was so boring, I just wanted to leave school and take a nap back home. Every second, minute and hour bored me.

The lack of change drained me of even the strength to resist gravity, sinking me bit by bit.

Once adapted to the murky depth of sea, there is no turning back.

Evolution is clever, but not omnipotent — it is still flawed.

Though it's not like living under the sun is the only way.

Deep-see fishes have their way of survival. Man, they are so disgustingly cute!

For someone who adores deep-sea creature, I can't help but think of them as romantic.

At least it's better than confiding in the aliens, and it suits the mysterious character better.

As I smiled to myself, Maekawa-san began her rerun:

“So...” Still resting on her arm, she looked sideways at me.

“So…?”

I tried speaking like her. What if she gets angry? I thought regretfully, but Maekawa-san didn't mind and continued calmly:

“I just wanted to say, I'm not a hold-back.”

Once again she waved the student ID at me. This time I noticed the blonde hair on the picture, which was now completely black.

Maekawa's head must have had an agricultural revolution or a bio-re-engineering!

“People often think I'm older because of my height.”

“I see.” I concisely expressed my comprehension. Well, no. I don't even think age is the issue here…

“Was that not funny? I thought it was a good joke.”

‘How strange’~ Maekawa-san stared at the clock with a finger on her lip, thoroughly confused. Her expression was like that of the science teacher who got more magnifying glass back than there are students in the class. The conundrum exists, but it isn't unsettling or anything.

I understand she was confident in her joke… However, I didn't see the elements of a punchline.

“Mmm...” Maekawa-san grumbled, “Hmm...” She glanced every now and then, busy gathering and processing the information while I passed time looking at her.

Since I knew that as long as I kept the “what's she doing?” attitude, she wouldn't suspect a thing.

Nevertheless, her body is so long! Looking more like a kite with only its frame, she didn't feel imposing. If she were in a Sengoku warfare, she would possibly be used as a substitute spear.[44]

Would this be classified as model physique? The April morning slipped away as I pondered.

☆

I should have realized from the last names, Mifune-san sat behind Maekawa-san.

In other words, object 'M' is located behind me, to the right diagonally.

“So Niwa-kun is a bread person, huh?”

Lunchtime. “Let's munch on our lunch!” invited Mifune-san. And so, I put the bread I bought this morning on her desk and began eating.

The neighboring Maekawa-san floated out of the class, probably headed to

the cafeteria.

Maybe I'm being nosy, but can Mifune-san see the front sitting behind her? Sigh, if not, just use Maekawa-san's back as the black board! (I suddenly went insane.)

"Cuz my aunt has to work. You got your own lunch, Mifune-san?"

"Yep, my ma made it! Oh yeah, just call me Ryuuko! Actually, you *hafta*!"

She gently commanded with a beaming smile. But it's probably not a good idea to force a shy guy to call her by name!

Mifune-san (tentative) took out a single-layered bento from a different bag. Beneath the wrapping was a tiny box, small enough for me to swallow the entire thing.

Erio, too. Half a pizza was enough – girl's digestive system shocks me. Or maybe it's just the whole weight-loss trend.

"It so nice to have lunch buddies right after getting inta new classes!"

Mifune-san's wavy hair and charming face radiated a light that could soften everything, possibly even contribute to world peace. If everyone has one at home, we won't need air purifiers anymore.

I will even breathe the carbon dioxide that's been to her lungs! I don't know if my organs will agree, though. I'm not an extinguisher; isn't it unsafe to do that?

"You're great help for me, too, since I don't know anyone. Don't you have other friends to eat with though?"

"All of my friends are in a different class, so it's kinda weird for me to butt in. It's sorta like, hmm~ I'm on an island chewing on grass, while they are eating luxury sushi on some faraway ferry. While they became women who don't need to wait for that time sale for fatty tuna, I turned into an acorn-eating forest-dweller. Wuu… There ya have it."

"It's not exactly the time to be saying 'butt in'..." Send an SOS, or you might die!

"Eh~ ya think? It's kinda fun on the island though~ No one would care if I cut a buncha trees down, and people wouldn't destroy my secret headquarter!"

"And no one would say a thing if you yell a bunch by the sea!"

I gave up on defying the direction of our talk. Why not hitch a ride? Islands

are awesome~

…… A perfect harmony between me and her, yet my back crawled as if there were ants on it.

The gazes from around us, especially those of the indecently curious guys, made me feel conscious. As a person who was often in their shoes, I knew not to mind them or feel upset. Actually, it's more like the premonition and warning of "I am possibly at the top of my life right now" made me so free that I wanted to say "Look closely! Better yet, record this and broadcast it nationwide!"...Well, that was a lie.

Mifune-san opened the bento. In it were cherry tomatoes, apple, Youkan, pickled cucumber, banana tempura and very little rice. It's like a famine in there; the menu lacked any red.[45]

"Are you a vegetarian?" I had to ask.

"Mm~" She quickly noticed that I was referring to her lunch and contemplated.

"If I hafta say, I'd call myself fruitarian?"

I don't really know where people like her should go. Your spirit of word-making is admirable, just remember to look back on the road of peerlessness.

"It's not like I don't eat meat; I just don't always. Well, that's what I tell people."

"Huh, that's unusual. So fast food is not your thing?"

"Yeppers. I love fruits. My goal is to become a tropical girl with juice for blood!"

The day of her dream-come-true, all the insects will gather around; my plan of mass producing Mifune-san may suffer from a setback! Ahh~ seriously though, Mifune-san is the best. Currently, she's my number one. Well, I suppose the number of people I know may be the reason, but at least she scores higher than Erio.

"Already eyeing the new guy, Ryuushi?"

Passerby A entered, foreshadowing the next event… Ignore the things a crazy gamer might say. A person neither transparent in name or appearance popped out and jokingly call Mifune-san 'Ryuushi.' Could it be that her name is 'Mifune Ryuushi Ryuuko?' With so much Japanese in the name, that's impossible even for a multiracial person.

“No and no~ I'm investigating if Niwa-kun from the other town bleeds sap~”

“What kind of speculation is that?” I gave a vague smile to the girl I just met.

“Also! Don't call me Ryuushi~ I order thee to say it right!”

She corrected the person with an overall not-too-harsh tone. The girl gave an equivocal smile to us and left.

The story will probably have little to do with her later, so I'll skip the introduction. What is important, however, is what's behind the word.

“Ryuushi-san.”

“It's Ryuuko!”Her angry expression was adorable. “Ryuushi is just a word; Ryuuko is my name!“ She focused her irritation on some strange things.

Mifune-san puffed out her cheeks; the shape of a cherry tomato appeared, like a manga character with cavity.

“So why does she call you Ryuushi?”

“Mm~ I don't like it either, but my name in Kanji is like this.”

With a pen, she wrote down her name in squiggly writing. “Ryuuko. (流子)”

“Ah, so that's why it’s Ryuushi.”[46]

So you can say her name like that.

“So which one is right?”

“Of course it’s Ryuuko~!!”

Mifune-san nibbled on her apple while explaining the origin of her nickname:

“Someone called me that last year. I tried correcting her, but she just ignored me, saying Ryuushi sounds more cosmic… In the end everybody called me that. That name... is a **hazard**.”

“Hm, like, you were sick?“ Cosmic? Something clicked as I spoke.

The uniform hung next door swam in the milkyway. Away with you!

“Ah, ya want some?”Mifune-san suggested to me the banana tempura.

“Yay~ stealing others' food has always been my dream!” I'll take what's

offered then. The green banana wasn't quite sweet enough, nor was it soft – it's like eating a vegetable. Honestly, I could only smile when she asked whether I liked it.

Mifune-san stared at my throat, continuing only after seeing me swallow.

"She doesn't come here anymore though – she dropped out."

"'Dropped out'?" The uniform covers Earth. Stop it, you conceited world-uniform.

"There were a lotta problems around the girl - must be complicated if she voluntarily left."

Picking up another slice of apple, she skimmed through the story with a lonely smile.

"I saw her the other day. Her style was, like, really unique, ya know? I think it's pretty cool."

"Huh, that's nice. What was it like?"

I responded quickly, feigning my ignorance. It was so smooth, the word "cool" may as well have been written on my face. Oh, but it's only because my empty answer is very well-ventilated.

"Heheh, it's a secret! You will know once ya see it!"

Mifune-san mischievously tried to pique my interest with a childish smile.

Then it's a secret for me too. Your friend probably lives with me!

Openly admit my affiliation with that person may just lead me to the road of ostracization, considering her previous circumstances.

Speaking of which, Erio and I are actually the same age! I had no idea about something so basic.

Does that mean Mifune-san's nickname is the legacy of her school life?

"Niwa-kun will definitely see her! She's quite the landmark of town now! Mm~Mm~"

"Wow~ I wish it'd be sooner~" I saw it this morning too. Actually, it's *haunting* me!

"I must visit blah-blah place today. Escort me with the bicycle, my assistant Watson!"

Omitting the jargon, Erio's intent was to force me to take her out. And so I

fled to school early this morning. As someone between a model student and a delinquent, I wouldn't skip school on the first stay – being late is my worst.

"I'm done." Joining her hands, Mifune-san finished her meal first. Seems like city dwellers are well developed in the technique of eating and speaking. I still had half my bread.

"Niwa-kun, got any interests?" As we packed our lunch, she flung out a question essential to a blind date.

"For interests, I would have to say deep-sea creatures. Sometimes I look up pictures of them on the web too."

"Deep-sea fish? Like shrimps or crabs?"

"Yeah, those." But you said fishes.

"And mollusks and jelly fishes?"

"Them too!" Was it intentional? Or was she born with it?

"How about cute ones? Like, you'd wanna catch them and stuff."

Mifune-san flapped up and down, imitating a fisherman.

Did the lady confuse deep-sea fish with tropical fish? Well, as long as it's cute, it's forgivable.

"If you're talking about ugly-cute, then there are plenty."

"Mm~ ugly-cute..."For some reason, she shot me a glance when she said it. 'Couldn't ya at least talk about the cute ones?' Deep-sea animals are indeed creepy; after all, they live in a totally different place.

"You should lend me an atlas if ya have one."

"Sure, if I can."

I answered unhesitatingly. Not that it matters, but whenever this girl says the word "atlas," it just reminds me of the "Atlas for Kids" grade schoolers read. We should be in the same grade — could this be one of the school's seven mysteries?

Mifune-san clapped her hands and cracked a smile:

"Then your name from now on shall be Shinkai-san!"

"No, that's not smart at all..." Specifically, the combination of the names.[47]

"Mm, then Shingyu-san." [48]

"Does every name you come up with overlaps with someone else's?"

And just like the Japanese dishes that focuses too much on preserving the original taste, they were always untouched.

Following her naming sense, people who likes spinach would be named P*peye, and criminals Harper.

"Hmm?" Finding no fault with her own declaration, Mifune-san tilted her head slightly.

I can welcome this type of quirk. Spending time together is always more interesting with a bit of variation.

On the surface, she looks like a modern girl; but on the inside, she's a bit retro.

Appearing like the Heisei period, but actually the Shouwa period — that's her impression.[49]

Anyhow, I will register the nickname 'Ryuushi-san' in my heart.

I like the name: it's not in bad taste, though I will pretend to not know who made it.

So ended my first day at the new school.

Since it's the first time for every class, we didn't learn anything significant, and I didn't need to borrow the books of my neighbors.

And so, my reaction: boredom.

In the end, I dragged my useless bag out of class. Today, I will be all alone on the way home!

Ryuushi-san said "I gotta club today, so I'll see ya tomorrow!" and left with a smile. I don't know what club she goes to yet, but it's worthy of imagination — nay, *prediction*.

"Hm~…" From her aura… Either drama or basketball.

While employing my brain on fruitless fantasy, I walked down stairs toward the shoe lockers. After changing my shoes, I discovered Maekawa-san at the neighboring row stretching by a pillar.

It's like seeing a giant sword fish on a crane. Her stretching body gave off a terrifying air; she's a candidate for creating shades along the summer road.

Her torso flexibly bent back; it was then she found my observing stare. For reasons unrelated to physiology, Maekawa-san blinked and spoke:

“Isn’t it the transfer student, what are you doing?”

“I am looking at Maekawa-san.” I spoke respectfully for some reason.

"Is that so? Whoooa!" She staggered backward, back still arched. How horrifying, it's like the standing version of the Exorcist; I almost jumped back.

Before I actually ran away, she regained herself. "Ahh~ everything's shaking~" She groaned while holding onto her head. Is she dizzy?

"Blood is rushing into my head… I'm seeing stars~" Halfway through her speech, she cracked a strange smile; it's rather uncanny looking from the side.

"Going home with a bike?" She resumed, still leaning forward.

"Yeah, actually riding it, instead of being ridden…"

It wasn't anything funny, but I still responded like that. Maekawa-san, though, burst out in light laughter; it seemed well-like. Considering our conversation this morning, she may actually be someone who laughs easily.

After she poised herself and re-did her hair, we unintentionally walked together to the parking lot. Walking side-by-side like this, I think I understand the mentality of wanting to call someone "Senpai!" or "Nee-chan!"

"Got plan for joining a club, transfer student?"

Maekawa-san gave way to the football club members who ran around the campus, and tossed me a casual topic. [50]

"Nothing, really. I was the phantom member of paper craft during middle school and P.A during high school." [51]

"How are those related?"

"Then how about yourself?"

Hearing my counter-question, she looked away toward the falling cherry-blossom:

"About a year ago, I was invited to many clubs. Then a week later, they all see me as an extra. So now, I am the phantom of the art club."

Was it injury? Family problem? Her heavy tone indicated such problems.

"May I ask why?"

"Hm, it's nothing big, but I guess this is why." Maekawa-san stopped suddenly, raising her arms in a victorious pose.

"…?" What if she asks me to do the same? I hesitated for a moment.

"Give me a second." She told me to wait. Everyone, give me your energy! I looked up to where her arms pointed to, but the only object in the air was the

sun. What is going on? As I looked back, I screamed embarrassingly – a frowning Maekawa-san staggered toward me, her slender legs unable to support her weight.[52]

If I move, her body would likely to crash into the ground at full force. I could only accept the challenge of catching a meteor with my bare hands. Surprisingly, though, I easily caught her shoulders. Is Maekawa-san's bone structure like a Pterodactyl's? Her weight did not match her height, rather light for her height.

"Thanks." She held her forehead even as she thanked.

"Ahh~ my ears are ringing, and blood is filling my head~" She spoke obliviously with mushy voice. What is wrong with this person?

"If I put my arms above my head for about ten seconds, I get dizzy; so basketball, volleyball and drama all gave up on my height. What do you call people like me?"

"A weakling."

"That's it. Not very useful, huh? I was fired from my part time job at the bookstore for this reason too."

"……"

A magnificent yet frail Onee-sama, how charming!

No; a frail, yet magnificent Onee-sama, how charming! Sounds better this way.

Either one sounds girly as hell though.

Maekawa-san regained her posture and began fixing her hair. She may be mumbling "Uu, uu" but seemed like she could at least walk now.

"There was a blood drive last year, and I went. The nurse told me 'You're a big girl. So we're taking 400cc!' ignoring my explanation and began the procedure. Something strange happened though: I finished about twice as early as the big guy next to me. I think my blood flow is like faster than other people's, maybe that's why I get dizzy."[53]

"Oh~? That means your blood is clean, so isn't that good? You don't have to worry about artery hardening."

"Yeah, the nurse also told me I'm likely screwed if I got into an accident."

"I see." Is this what they mean by "The weakness of the biggest weapon is

its back?" Mm, mm~ tricky.

We temporarily separate upon reaching the storage room. Since I parked the bicycle there earlier, I was able to get it out immediately. Maekawa-san, who got here before I did this morning, also got her ride out.

The same as I it saw yesterday, her bike was an everyday, silver city bicycle. As a side note, we call these 'Country bicycle' where I came from! Of course not! We call them utility bikes, or their dialect equivalent.

As we carried the bikes out, a comment fell in the air.

"That's a pretty retro bike!" As for who said it, take a guess.

I took the lead peddling forward. Counting yesterday, I went home with two different girl for two days straight. I am racking those Youth-points in! Does transferring improve my fengshui?[54]

However, my fortune lasted until the school gate.

"Eh?" Maekawa-san gave a bewildered sound, easily passing me and increasing the gap.

I gazed with envy and despair at the wheels that spun effortlessly ahead of me.

Maekawa-san waited and looked back at the traffic light. She scowled at the distance between us, slowly waved at me.

Making her wait for me bothered me too, so I waved back.

She sped up even faster, her slender figure disappearing.

"…I lost to a weakling?"

Adding a bicycle onto the list of necessities, I decided to save up on my allowance.

☆

The first thing I saw back home was the lying futon-roll. I know you're not a Chikuwa now!

Maybe I'm used to it; I didn't feel a point lost.

Since there was a NEET fairy, or maybe a NEET who wants to become a fairy, in the middle of the hallway, I raised my foot to step on it. But since abusing of animal is frowned upon, I merely stepped over. Heave- "Ho… Whoa!"

My foot tripped on the suddenly active Swiss roll, and I landed on my butt: "Ow…"

Without any preparation, I fell. The floor squeaked at the quake. I am not generous enough to pretend that it was fortunate that no one, including the perpetrator herself, didn't see me falling on my ass.

"Dammit…" I glared at the target of my words; Erio rolled on. "You little…!" I kicked the front end of the futon-roll, sending her forward until she stopped at the end of the hall.

Without the padding, she'd probably be bleeding out of her nose, like the loser of a brawl.

Man, mattresses are such nice things.

But since Erio didn't move, I still went and check her safety.

"Still breathing?"

"Chance of survival: high." She seemed lively.

"What are you doing anyway?"

"Act of vengeance. It is but natural: after discovering the act of physical contact which lacks common sense (rude), I must re-educate and-"

"Eat this." I stomped on the futon-pattern where her butt should be. I've had enough of your rant.

Man, futons are simply perfect. I would never kick a girl, but I didn't even think twice about this – futons just create a magnanimous air, like I could be forgiven for anything. Sixteen year after my birth, I learned the other function of the futon. What isn't taught at school, you learn at home. Hmm, perfect.

This must be the education of city~ what a convenient excuse.

"And then? What's an alien going to do outside during day time?"

"The cousin's view is respected: we operate during the night."

"What, so I still have to go?" Still stepping on her butt, I rolled her around. Yeah, futon-girl is not attractive at all. What a strange feeling, knowing how the person inside looks. It must looks like a rolled-up corpse from other's view.

"The cousin may be unsuitable as Watson, but you will do since I am understaffed."

"I am so sorry for being so unreliable. Maybe the aliens should just use a recruit magazine." I blocked Erio when she decided to attack again.

So she's learned the taste and convenience of hitching a ride! Or has she decided that I'm her comrade, if what she said about aliens was true?

"The evening, huh…" I have to go buy dinner anyway: "Fine, I'll take you."

I am sort of interested in why she acts so cosmically. As long as I get to the bottom of it, I'm confident a line of "is that so?" is enough to stop her tirade. Mm, being with Erio sorts of put me on the edge.

I don't know the reason, but she always either affirms my intuition or irritates me.

…Sigh, it doesn't matter why or how, the important thing is we got closer after seeing the content of the futon.

"Then, free time until the night. Meeting adjourned. Farewell!" I lifted my foot and restriction on her.

The unchained Erio advanced – no, assaulted with a motion. I dodged backward, letting her roll all the way to the entrance. "Uu, uu…" Her feet seemed to have absorbed some impact, and she whined weakly. I gave a smile, feeling a bit warm on the inside.

Before heading upstairs, I peered into the kitchen. Pizza box on the table again; another half of a pizza on the inside:

"Then the inside of that futon… Ugh, must be like a blender!"

I pictured the status of Erio's face, grabbing and pouring the barely tea in a cup, and gulped the drink. Maybe the water quality is different; it tastes different from the one back home.

The water of city tastes metallic. Perhaps, it tastes like blood.

☆

The night cometh. I actually wish it wouldn't.

I finally arranged the books I brought on the shelf (I read a few nostalgic book half way through the process). To ventilate the musty room, I opened the window.

The heat precipitating in the room mixed with the warmth coming from outside.

"Oh~ I could see some stars!" Leaning on my arms, I looked out the window at the stars. Whirls of thin cloud played background, tracing out the evening sky. The transparency was almost the same as the night back home.

“But the city’s lights are taking over the sky!” I scanned the city – not a speck of darkness. Lights from houses, stores, skyscrapers are incomparable to those in the country, which consists of maybe just the red beacon of radio towers. “Hm~”

Forget about that for now, if I could watch the stars with my friends on the park's bench, it'll give about two points. Especially during winter, when the air we breathe out turns into white smoke; even better if we have a can of drink to warm ourselves. “Hm—“ By the way, the mosquitoes during summer time would be annoying. “Hmhm—“ Shut it. How are you even speaking?

Erio, whom I intentionally princess-carried down the stairs (I actually wanted to kick her down), complained incessantly with eyes that emitted 'Are we going? Are we going?' Our destination was not the entrance, but the kitchen.

Like a dog who hates to take baths, Erio struggled when I tried to clean her up. I held her and forcefully took off the futon. Pieces of dry cheese and tomatoes stuck on her hair, and because of her rolling, there were even crusts on her neck. How admirable of her to lie down like that and even trip people!

Even sadder was that despite touching Erio’s skin a bunch, I didn’t feel my blood and pulse dilating. I felt like I was taking care of a needy animal, even though I shouldn't have become used to touching her. Somehow, I lose.

“Alright, you're done.” I let go of her after wiping where the eyes can see. Erio sprinted to the other futon I prepared without a word of thanks. Before hiding her face into the half-wrapped futon, she gave me a dry glance of “tie it for me?” with a heart sign… Probably not. I sighed and spitefully tied the rope.

“Hiding your only merit… You an ascetic? Or a hermit?”

“Is it really wise to expose a cosmic existence such as myself?”

“No, but you're totally exposed in some other way!” People like you are generally branded as socially ignorant.

As her compadre, I may also be lobbed in the same category. Sigh, nothing I could do.

People like me just have to suffer to get close to girls.

The loss with Ryuushi-san isn't obvious yet, but sooner or later I'll have to pay for my fortune; I thought melancholily.

Futon adjustment complete. I lifted Erio, whose sole exposure was her head, and carried her out the door. Would someone mistake me as a kidnapper of

cute girls? I worried anxiously, and tossed her into the bicycle basket. Combination complete; in some ways, this is also a Itasha.

"Alright, where to? Do heroes of justice really have a destination?"

"I must investigate the site. Further instruction will be issued."

"Now."

"Right turn after leaving the house."

What a convenient and comprehensive cosmic command.

With a kick, the bike began its motion: "Alright, now what?"

"...Initiating telepathy."

"Sorry, left my phone and TV at home, so I can't receive your signal~ So, **left or right**?"

"**Left side**."

Even with the directions stitched in between our banter, the bike traveled at a speed that provided plenty time. I hate this!

I didn't understand my GPS's navigation, so I stopped for a second.

"**Rewrite**." She tried to sound cool. You can read **days** as daizu, and I still won't laugh![55]

"A straight with momentum." Didn't think baseball is popular in space. You a part of Major League Spaceball?

"**Sunny-side up**." And that's cooking. Her terms were all over the place.

...Just where was she headed?

☆

Our destination was the beach across the city.

Night beach!

I emphasized again – this was the reward of two-hours of nonstop pedaling.

Am I accomplished now? I waited for the feeling to come over, but there wasn't much change.

Even in the city, the beach was quiet and dark.

I had to walk to the shore; It couldn't be helped. The sand shuffled – shuffled! - under my feet.

I got excited for no reason and paced like a chicken. Like a tap dancer, I kicked quickly, making more shuffling sound. Wow! I must looked stupid!

On the other side, the light tower consisted of futon and a pair of legs stood by the night sea. Romantic – the farthest possible connection. Waves coated Erio's ankles. Fixed, she stared the horizon. I think.

"What are you doing~? If you are seeing things, the eye doctor is always open!"

Maybe it's hard for her tell~ there are times when, in human society, we see 'things' we don't need to see~ Well, it didn't matter to the me who was having so much fun alone at the beach.

"Ah~Ha! Ah~haha… hah… phew...hah...hah..." Sorry, I can't do it anymore.

Hands on my knees, I heaved heavily. I'm exhausted. Totally forgot I just biked all the way here, doing too much leg workout – on sand, too. I'll have an appointment with sore muscle tomorrow.

"...Ah?"

I saw the supposedly still Erio moving closer to the beach. The futon gradually sunk into the surface, yet her strides were fearless and rhythmic.

Her head was inside the futon with no escape.

...Oi, oi!

Even though I just used all of my energy, I could only rush after Erio:

"Are you here to kill yourself?!"

She ignored my call; water reached her waist.

Ah, she fell like an idiot. She had no way of standing up because of her trapped arms.

This is the same as suicide by drowning. Are you stupid? Are you?!

"Ahhhhh!!" I kicked open the water, saving a moron. Like a scuba diver, I picked her up. What now?

It would be easy to just leave her here. As expected, she irritates me no end.

"Pu~" Water spumed from the futon. "Hng!" I pulled open the cover, letting Erio's face out. Her wet bang stuck on the forehead; she looked at me expressionlessly.

“Oi, ya crab, don't mess around like that. I will tie you up like a shrimp later, so stop pretending to be a crustacean.”

I pulled Erio out of the sea. With the water absorbed, her weight increased a lot.

“Floatation is possible in this coordinate; I had tested.”

“No, you were sinking because of the futon...”

“Even I… lack some knowledge.”

“Oh~ right~ then this must be a great experience.” I don't care anymore.

If I let Erio walk on her own, she may end up drowning again, so I carried her. Is this how a bored surfer feel as they return to the shore? Also, she's heavier than Maekawa-san!

“So, why did you come here?”

“I visit here and investigate on a regular basis, for it has everything.”

“All the way here? Walking too… Are you bored — no, stupid, or really enthusiastic?”

The only thing I was sure of, listening to all that, was 'you've got some stamina.'

“No, I flew here.”

“Hah?”

Her unexpected comeback astonished me. Erio spoke, spitting water and words:

“In the cousin's pitiful vocabulary — I can fly. During emergencies such as the diving from earlier, I will be able to evacuate using aviation.”

“…...” I was glad for not thinking of something like that. How comforting for my brain.

Many aliens and heroes are able to fly without training or reason — that is to be accepted.

…Such is the convenience of being an alien: you don't have to explain anything!

“It was a miscalculation of astronomical chance. There won't be a next time.”

“It doesn't matter if it was a miscalculation, you're gonna die if you're

gonna die. Jokes or not, death is death: the only difference is the person's feeling. The result is just that."

"…...The cousin with low predicted-IQ is lecturing me."

"Har-har, insult me more!"

Sigh~ I'll admit: I can't even beat a game's IQ test!

"You call yourself an alien, yet you can't warp?"

"Advanced technologies will interfere with an otherwise impartial investigation."

"Take notes from the futuristic robot cat then."[56]

Without room for discussion, I had to bike all the way back. Wet clothes stuck to my skin, the wind chilled me shivering, and my legs were swollen as well. This is the worst.

I wasn't hungry anymore – I just wanted to puke. How I wished to just jettison my cargo and not give a crap.

We left home at six; it's about eight now, so we'd be home at ten. It might be my first time out so late, because of my parents' strict upbringing.

Meme-san is probably already home waiting for our return. I do want to go home, but I fear facing my aunt. Is she the type to get angry with her kids being late, or is she laid-back?

She may be either indifferent toward or have completely given up on Erio, but she's always found ways to make fun of me. For example: "Oh no~ Makoto turned into a delinquent~ It's all my fault. Yay~ I didn't stutter~ Now I have to tell your parents. You son has been tainted, and often stays out late. He's even came home wet – really, really wet, like (the below content has been deleted due to unsavory content)."

Ugh. I hate this: these two robbed me too much of my peace.

As I quivered my way through another street, tongue out from dehydration, I saw a woman trapped in a sandwich hiding behind the street light. Thoughts interrupted.

"…..."

"……"

We stared at each others. Uh, what kind of sandwich is that?

Well, as expected of the city: full of freaks!

...Now isn't the time to be impressed. We got a wacko here too in the basket, kicking the basket and being annoying. Was it an act of intimidation? Aliens are so barbaric and rude.

“Transfer student… Transfer student of the night.”

There was no need to pull the content out from the sandwich – simply put, she was Maekawa-san.

She calmly strode closer after discovering my existence. Um, is this really my classmate? I suspected the person wearing a sandwich outfit.

From afar, she looked like a Nurikabe after losing weight. Or a yam cake that ran away from a store. [57] For some reason, she held a corny sign that said “Just five thousand yen.” Whoa, what is that~?

My understanding caught up then, however, and I chose to ignore it.

What's wrong with her? I know I asked the same thing earlier, but this time out of totally different reasons.

“Good evening, I am the sandwich woman.” She politely greeted. Must have been hard to bow in all that!

“...That name sounds like the heroine out of a third-rate hero film.”

“Was it not funny? Sandwich woman in a sandwich outfit.”

“I couldn't care for it.” We just want to get warm!

“Hm~ he doesn't care… Nevertheless, I am the sandwich woman — not man. Do remember that.”

“No… What you care about really doesn't matter.” If it bothers your that much, please try to emphasize more on your feminine part, ok?

“It does. Totally does — I'm a girl.”

Maekawa-san stubbornly maintained. I've heard the opposite of that saying, but it was fresh hearing someone insist herself as a girl.

“I take secret pride in hearing someone say 'you look like a model' and 'do you go to a beauty salon.'”

It isn't secret anymore if you divulge it. Are you asking for complements?

“'You look like a model!'”

“…...” Maekawa-san grinned with satisfaction.

What kind of stupid contest is this?

"Maekawa-san, how tall are you?" I asked what I was curious about, forgetting the whole thing with the cosplay.

"One hundred and seventy nine point nine centimeters." She puffed out her chest – or rather, the sign – and answered boastfully.

"Ah~ so, a hundred eighty?"[58]

"No – 179.9."

"...There!" I tipped on my toes and grabbed a strand of her hair. "Now you are!"

"How dare you!!"

"Oh, oh~" Now she's pissed. Maekawa-san burst in anger. Did I rub her the wrong way?

I kept my guard up in the event of being grabbed by my collar, but Maekawa-san slumped lethargically. Amidst this deja vu, she mumbled dispiritedly:

"Uuu~~ The ringing… Man, I've always had chronic headache whenever I yell. It must be because of my lifestyle…. Probably. But why do I get shoulder aches then?"

"….." How impressive of you, being sickly while not being labeled as sickly.

After the resurrection of Maekawa-san, she gave me an unhappy look. I held responsibility for making her like this.

Hmph! She turned away, noticing the object in the basket in the process.

"What's this? The transfer student reeks of crime!" Thanks, exposed legs on the futon.

"Yeah, I know, but she's totally alive! She's, uh, a fellow cosplayer like you."

"That's a pretty cool character~ Not even a ten-week manga would take her~"

"Then, uh, a mascot, yeah… She's homely-looking, suffocating and miserable; her name is the futon-roll..."

"Why not just toss it in the sea… Hey, isn't this Touwa?...I think! I can't see her face, but there isn't anyone else like that around here."

“Oh, you know her?”

“Everybody except new students or transfer students knows her. Unless you're a spy.”

Maekawa-san gave me a sideways glare. Oh, I'm a suspected spy cause I'm a transfer student? What kind of data am I stealing? Report on the bland taste of the cafeteria-sold bread? Who am I reporting to?

“She was notorious for a while… You know her, but not about that? She disappeared for half a year, from June till November. Right, Touwa?”

Erio repeated knocked on the basket with her ankles without speaking. Is she awkward about meeting her classmate? No, I don't think she's capable of that emotion. Plus they are sandwich and futon, food and furniture.

…Mm~ the mattress is winning slightly. I won't say what the contest is about though.

Anyway, 'disappearance…' What's that about?

Perhaps sensing my curiosity, Maekawa-san explained without regard of the person in question:

“Touwa said she was abducted by aliens; I thought maybe she just watched too much X-F*les. She even said she's an alien investigating earth, creeping everybody out before she left. I think she also watched too much cup noodle commercial!”[59]

Maekawa-san's poignant words were unrestrained, even when the party involved was right there. Erio banged even harder, ceaselessly protesting.

...Alien, kidnap, and disappearance. Hm, I think I can kind of see why she acts like this.

“So, why is the transfer student traveling with Touwa? Riding double… Hm, technically you are. What could this mean?”

Maekawa-san revealed a prying smile. It's amazing how she didn't come across as repugnant.

“Nah, it's cuz we're cousins.” I tapped the futon-roll.

The frail Maekawa-san was shocked into a stagger, almost falling again. “Whoah!”

“Wow~ seriously? You are relatives? And you live together?”

“I didn't even say anything about that!” Do I got a poster on my back?

Maekawa-san was shocked (skip). Is this person's learning capability also that weak?

"Wow, I was just kidding when I said that, that's why I'm surprised again. That's amazing, transfer student — I thought your were just a normal guy with no personality, but you have some extraordinary background."

The classmate of mine squinted at me like I was some exotic beast. Her already sharp eyes became even slimmer, making me wonder what she was staring at,

"Man~ if everyone in class knew about this, there will be a storm! Use your power and plunge the world into chaos!"

"City people are really into scandals!"

"Aha, I'm just kidding. I won't tell anyone — for now."

Maekawa-san agreed to postpone with a dangerous condition.

"Well, I guess its better if I don't say it — you don't enjoy storms, do you?"

"Oh, please spare me!" I was just tossed around in the sea, blown by cold wind and am now shivering.

Imperceptibly, Erio had already stopped her protest, exhausted from all the kicking. You tried, NEET.

"What is Maekawa-san doing here?" I don't know why, but I sometimes talk politely.

"I'm just strolling around; I like the night sky, especially the clouds."

…Uh. Is this person also trying to get Youth-points?

But, wearing that?

Perhaps noticing my stare, Maekawa-san simply supplied a reason that sounded like an excuse:

"I usually wear something else, like a uniform. I just felt like wearing this today."

Why would you ever feel like dressing up as bread? D-do you want to be eaten? (I uselessly accelerated my heartbeat)

"Do you have this kind of hobby?"

"'This kind of hobby'…?" She gawked. Oh, she can totally open her eyes! I thought they'd stay squinted all the time!

“Cosplaying.”

“Hm~ kind of! On my day-offs, I walk around in all sorts of outfits.”

'All sorts of'…? Um, would this mix my imaginations with some bias?

Maekawa-san looked troubled, the skin of her face gathered at the nose.

“Hm~ I orginally just wanted to be like the 2D(?) characters I liked… But, how do I put it, it just felt strange. Isn't it rare for there to be a female character close to 179.9 centimeters in a manga? So I thought “this doesn't suit me~” when I saw myself in the mirror. The cosplay just didn't look right, so I gave up on that. Now I focus on shop uniforms and mascot costumes.”

“Mascots?” The word made me think bipedal mice and Hello cat (is it white?).

“I'll show you next time.”

“Well, if I have to say it… No thanks.” Compared to that, I want to see her in a uniform more. That's too blatant, so I stopped myself.

“I use the name Kibo-nengu Deko when I cosplay. It's my handle, so call me that during the night~” She spoke in Edo accent for some reason.

“Kibo-nengu-san, huh?...Can I switch the kana's around to call you Maekawa-san?”

“What kind of reconstruction did you do to get 'Maekawa' out of those five kana's?” [60]

I still don't know Maekawa-san's first name.

When I parked the bike into the storage, I had just realized Erio was dozing off.

“Isn't it hard to fall asleep like that?”

I was honestly dead tired too, yawning constantly. If Patrasche were to find me, I would definitely pass out. [61]

As I entered the house with Erio in my arms, I noticed a pair of shoes that was absent when we left.

“We're back.” I whispered, expecting the owner to not notice. Good.

I ascended upstairs without anyone seeing us, walked to the end of the hall and into Erio's room.

I let her down and removed the wet futon, in case she got sick. And there

goes the first time I take off a girl's clothes. Uwah~ Another page in the memories I want to forget.

"Hng...Mm..." Erio wriggled, trying to block out the light from entering her eyes.

There wasn't any futon left, so I covered her with a few sheets of summer blanket.

Since the weather was warmer, it should be fine. As for bathing, she would have to take the advantage of being a NEET — whenever she wants.

But I couldn't do that; I had to quickly grab a bite from downstairs, take a shower and go to sleep. Unlike before, I don't have the luxury of having someone to wake me.

In the kitchen, Meme-san was eating the Erio's leftover pizza.

"Ah, welcome home~ You want some too, Makoto?"

"...That's Erio's Pizza."

"Don't worry yourself. She's already asleep in her room, right?"

Meme-san swallowed the pizza and wiped her mouth with her fingers and napkin.

"She was awake when we were out, but she fell asleep halfway home."

"Oh my, Erio went out with you? Mhm~"

Her obvious nonchalant attitude with her daughter was actually evidence of her affection.

"So you went out together, huh?"

"I was patrolling with a world Mediator armed with alien technology."

"Ah~ Right, right. I miss those days~"

I pulled up the chair directly opposite of her, my hand grabbing the pizza on its own.

"I heard Erio went missing last year."

"Hm, she did. Though I think it should be called 'disappeared.'"

We began devouring the pizza assiduously while talking about the absent family member; it wasn't exactly blooming with excitement.

"Was she kidnapped?"

"Who knows. It didn't look crime-related from how she looked afterward: she didn't lose weight and was uninjured."

"Then, she ran away from home?"

I split the last slice in half, one for each of us. Meme-san continued after gulping down her food:

"In June, she was supposed to come back home like everyday, but I didn't see her again till November – floating in the sea. Police tried retracing her steps and memory, but they found nothing… At least it was proven that Erio remembered nothing during those six months. Simply put, she had amnesia."

"So she filled the blank with the whole alien thing?"

I clenched my jaw hard.

"I think so. She loved the cosmos as a kid, so I think she chose what she knew about most as a mean to escape the fear of losing memory."

"….."

"Hm? Why do you look so angry, Makoto?"

"No, not really… Well, I'm not angry with you."

My anger was with that part of Erio – the part that no one knows about.

"Aliens…? Dumbass. You idiot. Give us some proof, dammit!"

I lied on the table, complaining about the person who wasn't here. I knew I was talking to myself, but I got a response.

"She wanted to prove herself, but failed."

"What...?" I looked up.

"Erio tried flying down the river on a bike; she landed on the shallow parts and broke her leg… In the hospital, she started wearing futon around her."

"The bike..." So that's why. The rusty bike must be the aftermath of the failed alien-playhouse.

You totally can't fly…!

Anyway, I'll feel angry first with how she ruined a bicycle.

Meme-san poured me a cup of tea, and I drank it gratefully. Keeping quiet, I tried to calm myself. Perhaps because she's exhausted from working, Meme-san didn't joke at all, instead stretching a lot.

I wanted to take a shower right after asking the most important questions.

"How was Erio born? At least it didn't seem like my parents knew about her."

"Wu—Cough, cough!" Surprisingly, Meme-san choked on her tea. She covered her mouth with the cup and looked away. That must be the look of a child who was caught playing a prank.

"She… There isn't much to say! She's like the mysteriously delicious drink that you would somehow make in a family restaurant."

"You are too old for this. What are you hiding?" I especially accentuated the old part.

"There should only be one kind of fluid that made her~"

"Meme-san, you're becoming the inappropriate character!"

Is this person really related to my antediluvian dad?

"Hm, I guess maybe the aliens were involved after all."

"Is that the best excuse you have??"

But, still… It wouldn't be too strange for Erio's birth to be labeled with "alien involved." If her look was because of some divine intervention, then aliens are definitely going to be great friends with us earthlings. Nice taste, guys, go make some figures!

"Even your aunt me doesn't really remember when I had her!"

"Hey!" You hag! Why are you lamenting?!

"The story that I was pregnant with her after an alien abduction is actually growing on me."

"I bet you just played around too much when you were young!" And you just don't want to admit it.

Meme-san glared at me with an upset pout, as if saying "that was surprising." It didn't last long though, as she relaxed with a sigh:

"O.K. I yield! I am the mother!"

"Uh-huh."

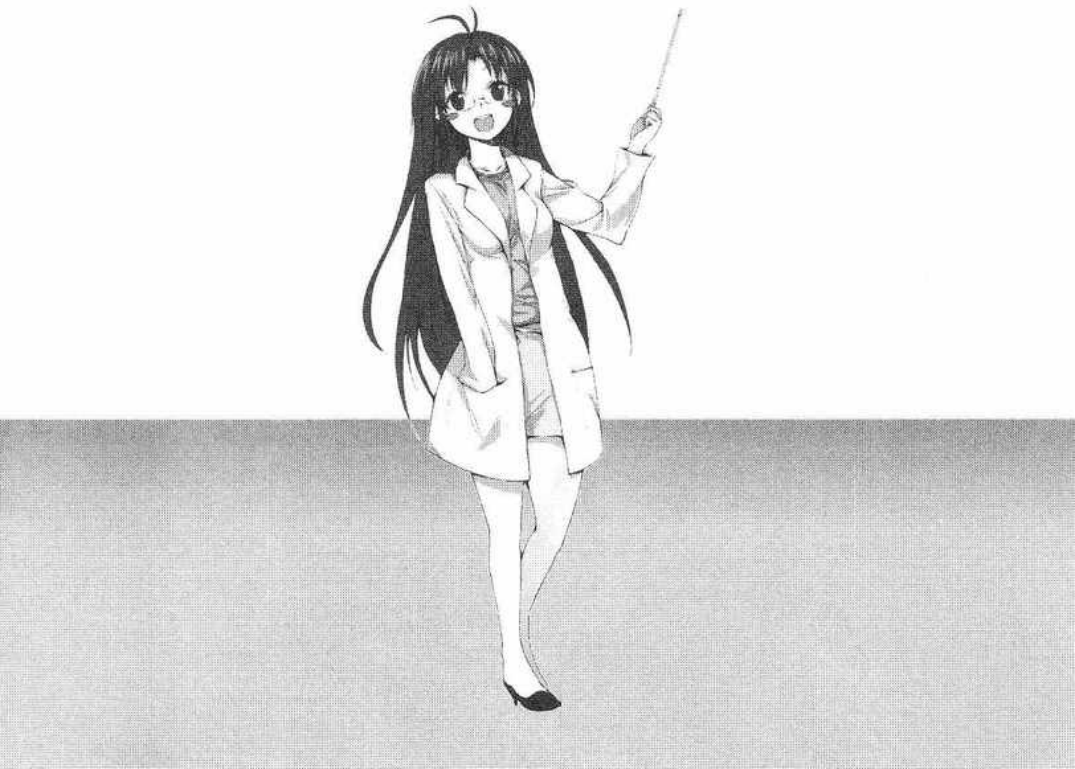
"And you are the father."

"Please at least be quiet when you're guilty."

As expected, she's helpless. We need more people to fix her problems.

- 夜の公園でエリオと夕食。そして与太話に付き合わされる。 +1
- 昼休みにリュウシさんと昼食。初回故に加算。 +1
- 前川さんと帰る。 +1
- エリオと夜の海に出かける。 +1
- コスプレ女こと、同級生の前川さんと夜の散歩中に遭遇。 +1

現在の青春ポイント合計 −4



- Listening to Erio's rant while eating dinner with her in the park: +1
- Eating lunch with Ryuushi-san in class for the first time: +1
- Going home with Maekawa-san +1
- Went to the night beach with Erio: +1
- Meeting the cosplay woman, in other words Maekawa-san: +1

Youth-Point Total: -4

四章『失踪する思春期のパラノイア』

Chapter Four - The Lost Teenage Paranoia

Rather than with lateral movement, she seemed more apt with longitudinal one's.

Oh, by 'she' I meant Touwa Erio.

The time was Saturday afternoon — a time filled with laziness. Warm light seeped into the window, endowing the room with serenity and dryness. To escape the sun, I leaned onto the entrance directly opposite of the window, reading the book I bought yesterday. Ryuushi-san recommended it to me after introducing me to the store.

Spending time alone in my own room could almost temporarily erase all the troubles.

Yet something stiflingly hot sat next next to me ruined the moment.

"...Why are you in my room?"

"UweeUwee~" Deciphering her is a pain, so I substituted her lines into a cute phrase.

From what I heard, this thing sleeps at ten everyday and wakes up at six on the second day. Erio's lifestyle is way healthier and more staunch than what it seems – not that it matters, because she looks like *that*. Still, there were things to learn from her.

"UweeUwee~"

"Oh~ I see. I didn't think it was so profound of a reason."

Basically, I think she meant "since you're free, and I am too, why not bring me to the beach?" which is why I tried to ignore her, lying down or facing away from the noise source.

I don't want to waste my precious weekend on the water that does not pay off the energy it takes to get there. Some energy is only restored and accrued through alone times. If I were to go out, I'd rather it be like a date with Ryuushi-san.

Because Erio permeates the signs of stagnation. In that futon, she looks like the fairy of NEET: even if the content is beautiful, it is still on the same level as the smooth hands of those who refuse to do works or chores.

"....." I peeked at her face – hm, I didn't even know where it was!

On that note, she's also been purposefully moving next to me since earlier.

Maybe she was looking down at her feet to follow my movement, like a dot on the x and y axis. It's like the table football me and my friends were obsessed with back home – she shuffled about like the hand bars on to the table. The thought of tripping and using her as a pillow sprouted. My chance of winning at this table football game, though, dropped to the third of a thousand.

"Huu~Hah~Huu~Hah~" The thigh-and-futon in front of me changed her breathing sound.

If she regress any further, would she turn into a water flea?

Her choices after giving up her human status would fall into the top five most primitive animals.

This girl wasn't oppressive, but the pressure was still strong enough to affect my breathing.

"...Stop trying to brainwash me. My country-bred brain can't decipher your noises!"

Shoo! I nudged her back with the back of my hand.

But if you earnestly used your looks to your advantage, I wouldn't be so sure… I'm truly helpless.

"Dammit, go away. Why don't you read some books too?"

"Hah~Huu~Hah~Huu~"

After calming down, she flipped onto her stomach. This preposterous entity *does* exists on Earth. Go back to your planet, dammit.

We lied on the floor and read the novel together. I wish it was that simple.

"Uu~Ee~Wu~Ee~" My neighbor swung her feet, protesting her treatment.

"Hah? The room is too dark for reading? Isn't x-ray vision easy for a '**super**?'

Or rather, you should just write the contents too and submit it when you're done.

A certain Light Novel and Illustration contest is looking for people too… wait, what was that? [62]

Is this what they meant by that "He that lieth down with dog" thing? I have only known Erio for two weeks, yet my brain is corrupting at a surprising speed. If this goes on, the worst case scenario would be the birth of the

combination of my body and Erio's brain. I need to at least resist… But do I? Maybe the order would be reversed, resulting in the combination of my brain and the futon. I don't want to give up on being a human. You could try to entice me by saying "you could spend a whole day in a futon with Erio~" but the only thing affected would be my heartbeat.

Two rings of doorbell came downstairs, from the window's direction, notifying us of a visitor. From the timing and her action prior, I predicted the visitor's identity.

"Alright, the cheese disk from space is here. Go get it… Well, not like I'll let you."

And that's the gist of it. Setting the usual aside, I do try to maintain the Touwa family's reputation, as a guest should. …I may or may not have thought this when I brought Erio to the entrance.

As a side note, the house owner Meme-san left a 'I'm going to work. Even though its the weekend… No day off..." complaint full of curses and went out early this morning. She mumbled about at least hoping it to be lucky today, dashed out on the bicycle with — intentionally — a piece of toast in her mouth.

"Ah, so she's snapped already." I saw my aunt away with the new understanding.

I paid the haunch-backed deliveryman and received the pizza. He was different than the usual chill guy, obviously wary toward Erio. Maybe the usual guy just turns a blind eye, so he acts friendlier. Just as I re-realized the peculiarity of the object next to me, the sound 'woosh!' came where my hands were (Erio stole the pizza).

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter… She darted into the kitchen in scattered steps. If she falls down now, it'd look like the colored version of the pied face. I thought as I slowly followed her.

I entered and sat at my spot in the kitchen, pouring two people's worth of tea.

Next, the routine feeding.

Erio ripped off half the pizza, aimed, and tossed it.

Shew~ The pizza dance in the sky.

"Shew~" Like catching a bouquet, I intercepted the food midair. Greasy. Splash! My finger-orchestra played a realistic soprano. The image of a piano played in the middle of a silent classroom emerged – a highly self-conscious

feeling.

I hurriedly caught the parts that were falling off where I grabbed the pizza. The original target, Erio, opened her mouth upward like a nestling. As if trying to grasp the situation, she wriggled in the futon, waiting for her evil mother to drop the food.

“Strip.”

If it was her, I could easily spit out words that would lead me to being sued by normal girls.

This must be what they call trust, right? Am I right, or am I right, dear fictional readers?

“For once, why don't you eat normally? I don't want to eat with you if you're going to be like that.”

Even though I didn't want to eat with her, I don't mean I didn't want to eat with her. The ambivalent motivation rocked the mass of my stomach back and forth.

“WueeHuu~” Erio appeared to be complaining. She flapped her legs under the table, probably angered by the denial of her sustenance. I kept thinking about throwing a Frisbee inside instead of a pizza.

“I'm gonna take off the futon!”

I loosened the cheep D.I.Y seal, letting the house air pollute Touwa Erio.

Hearing my declaration, she attempted an escape; I caught her with my leg. “UwahUwah~” A mysterious constraint threw Erio into a disarray. I ignored her reaction, dismantling the clothe line and forcing the innards out into the sun.

“Wow, nice to see ya.” The particles weren't flying today, obediently covering her hair.

Erio smacked my hand and the futon away, shutting her eyes, as if saying “accursed Earthling!”

How do I put it — only her eyes moved, giving the impression that her face lacked exercises.

'You think that's enough to stop me?' She stiffened her torso and pierced me with eyes shining with pride.

Erio grabbed the pizza.

Like doing origami, she folded the pizza in half, swept the topping off and ate them. Then, she stuffed the folded bread in her mouth and began the futon-wrapping process.

"….." Flaunting at me like that, are you a kid?

"UweeUwee~" Between the futon and the sound of chewing, Erio meant "tie it for me!"

Fingers twitching, I contemplating on strangling her as well.

I filled my stomach with the other half of the pizza and went back to my room.

Erio followed. Now I have a padding in case I fall, how reassuring… I may or may not have thought that.

So why does she stick with me? She must be seeing me as a comrade. What a pain!

We sat against the room's desk and listened to some music.

Erio snatched one of my earbuds away, rustling it under the futon and listened in. I hope Earth music is to your taste.

"....."

Snuggled next to a girl and sharing earbuds.

...Wait, what? This was supposed to be an enviable situation, yet my Youth-point calculator didn't move — there wasn't even light hitting the solar cell.

Mm, indeed I didn't see the neighboring object wrapped in globe pattern futon as a girl. But I did the sandwich Maekawa-san — why?!

Taking advantage of the confusion, my Karaoke solo begun:

"Go back to your planet, alien."

These lines were harsh, but not exactly spiteful. I evaluated calmly, swallowing the bitterness, and spoke.

"The universe is huge, so stop staying over at earth. The other galaxies are yours, so get a move on. Don't be like one of those mistaken 'friends' who stay over to eat dinner!"

"…UweeUwee~" They didn't pick you up? Were you ostracized?

Not just on the earth, but also in the galaxy. It's big, I guess, but that's still pretty empty.

Are you one of those people who panic when they hear P.E teacher yell 'pick your partner?'

I guess alien relationship is complicated too.

"Do aliens need oxygen to survive?"

"UweeUwee~" Hmph, how dull.

"Why do aliens like earth?"

"UuhoUuho~" Oh~ then go to a country with more beautiful women!

"Do aliens… like pizza?"

"UweeUwee~" That's all they eat… If a pizza shop sets up on moon, it'd be pretty popular.

Ugh—

She seriously annoys me.

Her wheels just don't spin.

So why, then, am I with her?

Under the spring sun, the question and sentiment spread in my mind.

☆

A lot happened in the two weeks passed since I moved here.

My books got here, and I don't get lost in school anymore.

I also made a few guy friends, whose primary reason of associating with me seemed to be Ryuushi-san.

"Why are you suddenly buddies?"

I don't know.

"What, did you know each other before?"

I don't know.

"What's your name, by the way?"

Leave me alone. Above were all my real thoughts, but my literal responses were slightly retouched. Below are some examples —

Q: Why are (skip)? A: "Cuz I lost to her during a race, now she's onto me."

Q: What, did (skip)? A: "If we've never met in the previous life, then no."

Q: What's your name again? A: “Leave me alone.”

I tried thinking seriously.

I'm not a transfer student anymore, neither am I special.

Maybe because of that, Ryuushi-san talks to me every chance she gets, probably to prevent my fate of becoming the shunned student A in class. In this time and age, rather than saying her kindness is wasted in the city, it's more like you can't get it anywhere but the paradise!

One of the three dudes asked me after hearing my explanation:

“Why do you get special treatments?”

I didn't know, so I asked.

“Hmmm, I like being the background class-rep character, y'know? The type people trust base on her abilities instead of title: someone who doesn't stumble easily. So I decided to win you over first! By the way, I was the head of lunch back in elementary school!” [63]

“…Something like that.”

“So why you?”

Give me a break! The eternal loop of Ryuushi-san Q&A began again, so I changed topic into “how much older can your lover be?” One of them said “Up to forty is fine.” Such desperate response made me really want to introduce a person to him.

After the seat change (completely done with drawing lot), I made a few guy friends. The price was the lost of Maekawa-san, who was now three or four seats away from me, and the opportunity to talk with her in class.

Ryuushi-san also moved to the seat close to the entrance window, which was the farthest possible distance from me. But she always swings by my seat to eat with me during lunch.

Setting our relationship aside, the curious glances from everyone else was getting sharper.

The gentle Ryuushi-san sang 'an unbalanced diet is an unbalanced heart' — a tune like a certain grade school's slogan — while giving the mushrooms in her bento to me, who always had simple bread. Is her sharing of food with the publicly vegetable-liking yet secretly shroom-hating me the manifestation of her naivete? If it was the result of careful calculation, I would have probably been gnawed to the bones and thrown away.

...And like so, my school life is generally good. Figuratively speaking, it would be the front wheel of a bicycle.

The family, which represented the rear wheel, would be the problem.

☆

I was forced to accompany Erio to the faraway beach at night.

"Ugh, what a pain. I have to study." After my decline, the futon-girl would shadow me everywhere, groaning about how important her tasks were. She would even arbitrarily come into my room to watch TV. "Beep~Beep~Tss~Tss~" was the sound of her cosmic exchange. She's pretty much a new breed of monster. I beg you to migrate to that world where nothing is impossible.

Sometimes I give in to her persistence and go out with her, surprising even myself.

Why?

Honestly, some parts of Erio vexed me to no end.

But I still served as her driver every three days.

And Erio would walk to the beach during daytime for the remaining days.

Toward the sea where she floated amnesiacally.

In a way, her consistency and perseverance impress me.

"Would your memory come back in a bottle if you come here? This isn't exactly like how the culprit would come back to his crime scene, y'know?"

I sat on a terribly corroded bench that was away from the waves and inquired the stalled mattress. She didn't answer or look back.

lately, when we come here, Erio only looks out from the futon as if peeking at something.

Slightly sticky wind blew every now and then, lifting Erio's exposed hair and stealing the particles. But then it would immediately start emitting rays again — from just the neck up, she really is pretty.

What a waste. The thought appeared as I stared at the back of her head.

Maybe I'll think differently if I look at her side face! I couldn't openly stare though, because it's embarrassing.

"But… it really is quiet."

I checked last time, kind of hoping to see delinquents or biker gang

occupying the place, but I saw neither cherry blossom or grass that should be growing during spring, nor people who came to do some early water-dipping. Sigh, motorcycles rust around water, so I doubt anyone would come.

I took off my sandals and followed the beach line to Erio. Man, I'm already used to the shuffle of sand. Human nature is truly depressing, always casually devouring the food of life and making a mess.

As for Youth-points, it counted during the first time, but not anymore since it became a weekly routine.

"Oi, space girl, can you hear me?"

"Speak, Earth ape."

A venomous riposte, with a simple 'Earth' added in. There are aliens apes, too?… Oh, there are!

That's a movie though. [64]

"Why are you still here, if you're an alien?"

Back to your home world. I think like this because I'm a xenophobic Japanese.

"Don't tell me you're the vanguard of an alien invasion force who fell from a ship."

"How did you know?"

Didn't know she could improvise a shocked expression. Not that I care. Oh well.

If her delusion is for the protection of her subconscious memory, then oh-well.

"Also, your mom totally looks Japanese! Where were you born in space?"

"It is inexpressible in Earth tongue. Based on my judgment, the cousin's score in the Earth's world language, English, is below the decimal points, rendering it impossible for you to comprehend."

"Hey, that's going too far!" You're overestimating my grade.

Cough, cough!

She created a barrier made of linguistic energy. Is it really that scary to lose all your memory?

...Perhaps it is.

It is essentially death.

Sometime I see the transformed Maekawa-san of the night — our habits seem to have significant overlapping.

"Maekawa-san, what do you think of aliens?"

I sat on the swing of the kid's park (where me and Erio ate dinner), curious of the girl who was energetically carrying out the pendulum motion next to me.

After bumping into Maekawa-san, Erio would always head home first.

By the way, Maekawa-san was wearing a convenient store's uniform: the ones with green and white stripes.

We had a lot of those stores back home, but I have yet to see one here — the company probably hasn't expanded here.

"Aliens… Have you been infected by Touwa, transfer student?"

She sought the pleasure of fast swings, despite having to bend her knees.

Initially, Maekawa-san swung with straightened back. Her head rammed right onto the metal bar above, making her writhe painfully in the muddy ground for a few minutes. "Ack…"

Her store uniform now looked like a baseball player's after sliding in mud.

"No, I'm just curious. You don't have to be serious, but what do you think of them?"

"Hm, well… I suppose they're not too different from religions. Some believe in them, some make money off of them, but I feel like people seek spiritual comfort from both."

"Huh… I see."

"Besides Touwa, do you have other reason for asking this?"

"There is. I want to use it as a reference as to how I should think and do."

Since ignoring our Miss Touwa-san is not good for my health.

Strange, though. I actually wanted to get closer to Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san, but why am I wasting time with Erio at the beach? Ever since moving here, I haven't gotten my Youth-points to positive. I thought I actually wanted to spend more time with people who aren't Erio.

"Oh yea. Wanna dress up with me, if you're free tomorrow?"

"At least think of something *I* would want to do!"

“Hahah, whatever animal you want, I have all~ of them!'

“Chupacabra.” [65]

“Alright! Let's go drink some blood! Our targets will be couples!”

“You have it?!”

It's not B.S? Someone found the real deal?!

“Sigh, I can't go even if you have it. I got things tomorrow.”

“Things? Someone who looks as free as you? What could it be?”

“Things.”

Maekawa-san smacked me with the arm of a Gibbons. Her arms went up at full speed and fell on me.

But, if you keep this up…

“Ahh~” After three strikes, Maekawa-san faltered.

“U~wahh~ The blood~ The blood is rushing into my head~”

She kneeled down in a daze. The swing swished by in a pendulum motion, grazed her back and…

“...Ah.” What do you call this awkward feeling?

The almost palpable 'pain' appeared before my eyes.

☆

I made a date with someone yesterday.

At the station that I had never been to since two weeks of moving here, I arrived at eleven o'clock.

Since I told the other person I only know the streets around the taxi stands, she supportingly said, “Then we'll meet around there~” I rode my bike to the meeting location.

I took a while deciding on my outfit… In the end, I wore a shirt and a pair of cargo shorts – basically what I usually wear. Is it better to wear something that has more city-ness (what?) I regretted a bit, but considering what the wearer is composed of, there's not much use lamenting… I grabbed my bangs; I'll probably dye my hair sooner or later.

Besides, spending an entire night going through all my clothes, arguing back and forth 'this looks better~no, this looks better~' is already Youth-points

worthy. Well, whatever. In any case, I was a bit tired.

Instead of Erio, a satchel sat in the basket. The basket is finally doing its real job!

"Sigh, I guess I can't assume things about *that* either."

There isn't a point in thinking about the meaning of life.

What I refer to is my basket's regular, Erio, who walked to the beach today as well. She begged me to be her personal driver even on the weekends, so I fled here after running away from her. I didn't feel guilty, but this bike does belong to Erio, so I kind of regretted it now. I should have asked her. I'll casually apologize to her after I get home.

"...It's gonna be a problem for her to ride though."

Arms trapped in futon with only her head out: riding like that, she may even have the choice of circus act as a future career! But more basically, I don't even think she can go out alone.

"…Oh, there she is."

My eyes caught a girl running lightly toward here.

...Hm? Her appearance was very familiar. I paused the motion of adding another point, squinting hard.

The girl waited on the other side, waiting for the light to change while marking time. [66]

The person you're waiting for isn't so important that you should be freaking out so much! I thought, a bit self-depricatingly so.

The person I'm meeting was Ryuushi-san.

She told me she's bringing me around the city during the weekends.

Since Ryuushi-san's always in club after school, she's never free after school.

She slid in front of the bicycle, using the friction between shoes and ground to brake. Entry. Her shoulder moved up and down as she heaved, and sweat drops were forming on her. The makeup on her face was wearing off a bit, but I pretended to not see.

Why is she wearing school uniform, anyway?

"Good… Morning… Uu, it's hot~"

"Mornin'. Uh… Nice casuals you got!"

“Ah, ya mean this…? Sorry. My morning practice took a for~ever, so I couldn't change… It's super~ embarrassing, but I didn't want to make ya wait...”

Ryuushi-san somewhat moved her tired lips and arms full of lactic acid, and explained her attire. [67]

“No, it's fine; I don't mind. Where's your bicycle, Ryuushi-san? You parked it somewhere?”

“Eh, hahah… I ran all the way here!”

With hands on her knees, she managed a laugh before a torrent of coughs ensued.

“Why?”

“Cuz… I woulda hafta wear helmet.”

“Ah, eh…?”

“Then it'd squish my hair… so I ran here.”

“…...”

She didn't think to ride without wearing a helmet. This girl is the devil of adorableness!

Until Ryuushi-san caught her breath, my fingers were twitching to pet her head.

“My hair is really naughty~ If I leave it alone, it'd straighten itself~ I wanna be a curly~ Seriously, it's de-curling again~”

Her homemade words weren't exactly coinable, but they somehow carried the meaning across anyway — impressive. Ryuushi-san redid her messy bang, tilting over and peeking at my bicycle basket.

“Aren't ya parking it?”

“Ah, nah. I can catch up.”

“That sounds kinda weird, Niwa-kun… And I told ya, it's not Ryuushi.” As per usual, she added.

Ryuushi-san strode forward, her ordinary footsteps drowned out by the bustling city.

“Oh, not bad: the bike's actually faster than walking today.”

The two-step distance between she and me elated both the bike and its rider.

Since my goal was so low, I ended up wasting more energy looking everywhere for something that would encourage my spirit.

Even if it's out of my reach, would it still be better to have a more normal goal? After all, Ryuushi-san's looks were kind of stinging.

Mm… If this goes on, she will suspect the meaning of this bicycle's existence. I have to prove to her that we are two-in-one.

I timed, when pedestrians around dissipated, and shifted my center of gravity backward.

"Check it, wheelie!" I showed the only trick I know on the bicycle.

Strictly speaking, it's not a wheelie, but more of a jumping-on-the-rear-wheel

"Whoa, a circus performer!" Her pitying stare abated a bit, and she even clapped twice.

Since doing something like this on a crowded street just spells trouble, I quickly landed on both wheels.

Rolling on earth is a bicycle's job.

It cannot exceed its ability or defy gravity.

☆

The time was close to noon. Ryuushi-san had brought me to a diner nearby.

Before we went in, she was exceptionally animated, even declaring, "I'm uber pumped!" What's happening? Surprised, I walked inside.

After being led to the no-smoking area, I glanced at the waiter who served us. Maekawa-san probably has their uniform too, I thought while ordering the Beef Risotto with unlimited drinks on the first page of the menu. Ryuushi-san picked tomato salad, rice and vegetable soup with drinks. Basically, it was a full course meal without the full course — limbs-without-body meal.

If a stranger saw her, he'd probably think she's trying to lose weight! Her meal content was way too healthy.

"I'm amazed at how you're not underweight." I had a sudden urge to hit her with an ashtray from the smoker's area as I asked. "Won't you get hungry later?"

"Hm~ I guess. Make that two salad, please~"

"...At least get a different one!"

We went to the beverage dispenser together, and there I found the reason of her excitement.

“Hm, this has a calcium-color~ Kids probably don't like 'em too much. I'm gonna add some tasty carrot juice~!” Ah. The fluid turned into the color of Apollo Chocolate’s top. [68]

“You mix drinks too, Ryuushi-san!”

Wasn't she humming while pouring different color fluid into a glass? She'd even forgot portioning.

“I'm not Ryuushi-san~! Doesn't everyone do this?”

“I think it's just city folks! Back where I lived, nobody does this.”

Because there weren't any diners, but a lot of cafes.

Whimsically mixing her drinks, she began nitpicking the country's problems:

“That's bad: it's like having sixty percent of your life with no spice.”

“That bad?” And I don't even know how life tastes.

From another angle, that sixty percent is also open for use, so I'll accept it like that.

“Prototype complete! Drink it!”

Ryuushi-san revealed the amber liquid and gave it to me.

“Wait, *I’m* drinking it?”

“This is my work of pride.”

“Then I'll give it a shot.” To exaggerate a bit, it was handmade by Ryuushi-san!

I sucked into the straw.

The taste was enough to kill; it didn't even get swallowed.

“Wassup? Not sweet 'nuff?”

She worriedly handed me syrup. Man, girls are really into sweets! Hold it!

“Is this carbonated?”

“Full of CO2!”

“Yeah, I'm no good with carbonated drinks.”

Because it dries and burns my throat, even if it's just sitting in my mouth.

"Eh~Sorry~ You shoulda told me first."

Ryuushi-san waved her arms, either concernedly for, or protestingly against, me. Under her lovely expedition, my Youth-points boosted immensely, but I didn't think she'd tell me to drink it.

"Niwa-kun is the Oolong tea guy, right? But failure is the mother of success, so I'll learn from this experience… Um, but doesn't this mean if the mom doesn't fail, there won't be a kid?"

With a joyful and positive tone, Ryuushi-san turned her failure into ambition.

How do I say this — it seemed that she had just described a philosophy that fits even for life. Based on her personality though, maybe it's just something normal a ditz would say.

"Alright~ Let's make a number two! This time I'll make ya shoot beams outta your mouth!"

"And when do you plan on making that happen?"

"A success depends on a dad, too! A happily-married couple~!"

I realized her premise for prototype number two was failure. That makes me the monitor!

Ryuushi-san mixed number two with Oolong as the base, and number three which overwrote number one (which she drank, like an indirect kiss. Whoaho~). She then came back to our seats.

"Oh yeah. What are your interests, Ryuushi-san?"

I swiped the sparkling number two and number three out of my field of view, casually bringing up the topic.

"**My name is Ryuuko**! Mm~ Interests. Interests! ...Now that ya asked… Um, like… clubs? Oh yeah, here ya go." She nudged number two over here.

"What club are you in?" I'll live on with my head held high!

"Girl basket ball; cuz I like M*tsui His*shi, so I joined." She picked up the cup.

"M*tsui His*shi…?" I glanced over at my feet occasionally. Maybe someone was crawling toward me, grabbing my foot and asking for help.

"Don'cha know Sl*m Dunk?" The two glasses assailed me constantly.

“Oh, I know the name. It's manga, right?” Don't look up, and don't look down. Just live in the present! The present!

“Yeah, that! It's super awesome! I'll lend you a few books; ya should check it out. Ah, do you read manga?” She utilized her arms to the maximum, even sending the glass of water over.

“If I must say, it's like I didn't really read them when I was a kid, so I don't have the habit.” Even though I think the one in the middle is drinkable, judging from the atmosphere, the first to give in loses, so I didn't do anything.

As the battle played on in the cordial air, Ryuushi-san's salad was served. The verdancy of the cabbage and blush of tomatoes contrasted, and for those who see it… They must recall the brothers who grow bigger eating mushrooms.

“I'm diggin' in!”

Ryuushi-san set the glasses on my side, temporarily ceasing fire. She joined her hands, properly greeting before eating.

Though her taste in drink blending is X, she indeed has the capability of a saint: affable with others.

She picked up the tomatoes with a fork, putting it in her mouth before the juice dripped. Ryuushi-san chewed, a cheerful smile on her face like when I eat my favorite food, such as burgers.

Mm~ tomatoes I get, but cabbage… Ryuushi-san must be a herbivore! So if I'm a carnivore, I can eat her! (Mental status: really broken)

“Ryuushi-san, do you have any special talents?”

“Hm, talents?”

The transport of cabbage halted halfway. She put the fork back into the bowl, arms crossed.

“Talents~… Using ten yen coins to, ah, not that… Using ropes or clothe lines, um… I can sometimes use grade schooler tickets… that's dumb… It doesn't count~...Nope… no, maybe it does. Forget what I said, I wanna cancel! Boomska boom boom~”

“It's alright if you don't have one...”

“T-thats rude! No, I mean, shuddup! I totally do, and I have lots!”

The sweetly-rash Ryuushi-san was a feast for the eyes.

“Ah! I know!” As if grasped a thread of hope, she beamed a brilliant light.

“On the elementary school yearbook, isn't there a section for teachers to write down comments and compliments for their students?”

“Oh?”

“The teacher complimented me, saying I was the best at making cyclamen bloom!”

“Bloom? So it spread a lot of flower particles (粒子)?” [69]

Seems like your teacher didn't really know what to write! Even if my mouth gets ripped, I will never say this out loud. Ashtrays are scary things!

“Well, it was actually a Hyacinth at the time.

"....."

What's up with your going silence? Seriously, airheads!

“Heheh, so that's that! What about Niwa-kun?”

Ryuushi-san didn't seem to have understood what she just proved, flinging the same topic back to me while picking up her fallen cabbage. “The cabbage core is awesome~” She seemed satisfied.

“Talents? Wasn't my wheelie good enough?”

“If ya think so, sure~”

She smugly assented. If Ryuushi-san hadn't dug her own grave prior to saying this, I might actually get mad. She has quite the foresight, I admiringly thought.

“Oh, can I ask another question?”

“Sure. Go 'head.”

Even though I objectively couldn't find what made her happy, the fact was that Ryuushi-san is feeling exceedingly great. Then, here I go.

“What is 'mystery' to you, Ryuushi-san?”

“Hm… Mm~ mm… About that...”

As if her head-down was drowned in water, she squeezed out an anemic response, mood drastically changed.

“Gimme a sec, I'm switchin' over to my brain's serious parts.”

Zoom, click. Ryuushi-san motioned and made the sound of switching

mode. She seems to have altered her brain's hyperlink function. Amazing: the division must be the reason why your usual behavior is so (omit).

Why did I ask her that?

The reason why Erio irritates me so much may be because of the way I view 'mystery.' So I thought about listening to others' opinions.

"Um, I got it." She raised her hand.

"Go ahead." I picked her.

"It's like this!" She answered.

Ryuushi-san smiled, expanding her arms to her joy. The waiter also happened to served us the Beef Risotto and soup at the exact moment; her gesture and charming smile froze right there.

"Whoa!" The server was indeed baffled.

"Uwoooooh~" The herbivore gave a cryptic cry.

"So, is there more to your answer?" Since her arms were still out, I asked gingerly.

"Of course!" Ryuushi cheered herself up. She perked up, fixing her messy clothes and hair.

Both hands on her knees, she began her childlike explanation on 'mystery':

"The things I see, things I hear, say… To me, they are all bewildering.

"Even though we learned in science class reasons why things happen, I honestly don't think they feel real. And the tools we used too. Like phones: I know how to use it, but I don't get how it works. Cars are fast, but I don't know why either.

"Just how much do I know? It's got me thinking, and it's got me confused. But I know I'm alive because of something. Sometimes, before I sleep, I even ponder about the mysterious things that kept me alive~"

"….."

The answer I sought was found.

Astonishment and the sage right next to me wet my eyes.

"You're right." I couldn't help but gave a twisted grin. The me now must look creepy as hell.

"Ah, no~ I'm embarrassed about how shallow I must sound. Sorry."

“Ryuushi-san, you pass!”

“Whua? Ah? I passed…? Wow~!”

After a delay, she finally picked up, raising her hands with the fork still in one.

The scattered customers focused their gazes on us, as if blessing.

From society's view, we'd be called 'idiot couples'… Only if. My evil thoughts churned.

☆

Afterward, Ryuushi-san brought me around the station.

I asked her to introduce me some bookstores where I can spend my allowance, also a relatively cheap cloth shop nearby. Too bad it wasn't exactly male oriented.

By the way, the worst things I've said so far today, “what's a boutique shop?” has been trashed and promptly deleted.

...Someone please kill my brain cells!

Though I made a freckle-sized black history, today was, overall, a meaningful day-off. Youth-points, without a doubt, increased by three points.

Just how much do I have collected now anyway? To be honest, the calculations were done with basic arithmetic depending on the situation, so the result isn't recorded.

I bought a few novels in the used-book store, and then a cheap hat at some other place. I asked Ryuushi-san, “does it fit?” after putting it on.

The answer was, “Ahahah!”

Ahahah!

Since a certain aunt was waiting for me back home, fussing me, “we should at~least~eat~dinner on the weekend~”, we went home after five.

“Remember to show me the assignment tomorrow in class~” Ryuushi-san waved me goodbye and ran her way home. After separating with her at the station, I stepped on the inefficient bike pedals.

Spending way more time than the on the taxi ride, I cycled into the city of aliens. Passing through the shop that sells seven-dimensional key chain, I admired the houses and road saturated by a nonseasonally red dusk and strolled back home. It isn't bad to relax while you can. Whenever Erio's riding

with me, I can only focus on keeping up due to the increased calcium intake.

"...Man~"

My gaze (seemed to have) locked on with that of Erio, who was walking on the opposite side of the road far away. Even with the futon between us, I could sense her stare. Wait, no; I don't want any super power. Erio dragged her left foot along. I changed the direction of my bike slightly, riding toward her side. Being next to her during daytime really stands out! I definitely don't want to become the person we are looking for in "Finding W*ldo."

"...This is so sad." Even walking with just my feet, the speed wasn't too different.

"You want a ride? Or do you want your bike back?"

Walking shoulder by shoulder, I kindly taunted her.

"The permitive tool that suits the kousin's feeble berdy is embarrassing. I do nert need it."

Erio dragged on while (probably) forcing herself to answer. I looked to the ground; one of her feet was shoeless.

"Oh I know, why not just fly? I don't get how it works, but it has to be easier that walking! Oh yeah, how about flying with a bike? You can reenact that one really famous scene!" [70]

I freed one hand from the handlebars and pointed it to the sky, making it so Erio can get on the bike. She ignored me, though, and walked on aimlessly.

"Sigh, I bet you can't fly even on a bike! Even though you're an alien."

"….."

Originally walking forward, Erio turned around. She intentionally hid her face, readying her shield.

"If you try to fly, you're probably going to crash into the river again!"

"….."

She faced forward again, looking away. Not like she could see anything.

She really annoys me. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but mind for her. Is this the power of being cute?

I held her hand, leading her to the right path. As for my impression of feeling her hand, put it metaphorically, it's likely to melt faster than ice cream in the summer; and it will return to the air with no aftertaste.

Carrying her up the bike, I learned what it's like to be a class leader bring everyone to school. I asked myself what to do next.

The opportunity for a heart-to-heart dripped, waiting to erupt from the spiritual faucet.

Do I say everything now? It's going to be terrible if I deliver a half-baked speech and have to find another time for a one-sided talk.

Please, I don't want to spend more time with the current Erio. Stomach ulcer and pimples are dreadful!

"You wear the futon, because you don't want to bike anymore, right? Honestly, I don't get how you thought of that… But where is the lost memory? Like how you treat aliens, you could only 'believe.' If aliens exist, then your memory must be in their hands — yet, you can't fly."

And so, she could only seal it away. Lock away her own inability; make an excuse in order to survive.

...I don't deny the act in itself. However, her way of exploiting the name of alien rubbed me the wrong way.

"You're not going to make any excuses?"

"I have no interntion to explain to cernscienceless berngs."

"...Is that so."

End of conversation. I stuffed Erio into the basket and onto my wallet and the bag with book. The ride begins.

Before the sun set, we returned to the house of Toudou— I mean, Touwa. Erio didn't get off the bike until I parked it into the storage. I carried her off the basket, and we walked into the house.

Then, we stopped in front of the entrance.

"….."

"….." For some reason, neither of us wanted to go in first.

"You first."

"To averid a sneak atterk, I must stey berhind."

"...To avoid a sneak attack, I must stay behind?"

Anything counts as a sneak attack against you!

☆

The time was now two days later, the night of Monday. Since the new school's class progress is different than my old one's, I was studying.

I plan on going to college, so I study quite a bit. Erio went to bed early today as well, with no intention of going out. There's also the repercussion of our single-sided argument.

Though I didn't really care — that's just what I called it.

I'm pretty damn insensitive, right? *right*.

There were only sound of pen sliding across paper and pages of book flipping…

"Mako-chan~ let's play~"

It was supposed to be, but an obviously bored person had to barge in here.

"Please act your age!"

As a person of natural candor, I sometimes speak frankly.

"Why? Mako-kun is still a kid!"

"I mean you..."

The agility of a woman who's about to become forty is eye-popping.

Meme-san, who just came out from the shower and was still steaming, stood next to me while covering her hair up with a towel. She peered over at the desk:

"Oh~ You're studying? Math, huh~"

Meme-san pinched the page up with her finger tips, flipping without regard to the marked pages:

"So this is what you're learning~" She flicked the corner of a page with her middle finger.

"Don't you know that you should be quiet and not bother someone who's studying?"

"Nope. I didn't have my own room."

She denied altogether, even using irrefutable facts as her argument.

"Haven't you heard from your dad? We used to live in a crappy apartment."

Meme-san flipped the pages continuously and spoke.

“No, I haven't spoke often with dad since long ago.”

That's why I admired leaving my parents and living alone.

We don't talk not because there aren't relatives around, but because we don't have anything to talk about. I hope something that awkward would never happen.

Meme-san closed my book and notes, and put my pen and eraser back into the pencil pouch.

“Why are you putting my stuff back?”

The cleaning hand paused because I grabbed it. Meme-san stared her eyes out, scarily playing out appearance of a childish girl. How fearsome, if it was natural.

“Why? Because Mako-kun is playing with me!”

“Too much restriction would affect a child's decision making skills.”

“Staring at these tiny words till the middle of the night will make~you~old~”

She began imitating a realistic monster (I dub her Forty-years), becoming even more suspicious. Is this really an act?

“Is burning the midnight oil a bad thing?”

“Knowing me, you should know I ignore rhetorical questions!”

She actually ignored my query and started to pace around the room:

“Hey, what is this framed award for? Dirty mags?”

“Miss foreign, we're in Japan: please use proper language.”

“Let's see… Kanji Certified level three? That's pretty lame~” So not just questions, but everything in general is ignored? [71]

Meme-san browsed through the words on the award and put it back. She walked toward the shelf; the hanging towel swung, following her like a pony tail.

“Hm, deep-sea creature… Wu~uu, you don't like manga, Mako-chan?”

Meme-san confirmed what's on the shelf and asked. Indeed, it was filled with novels I bought from the store; their authors' names forgotten, and their genre eclectic. And the rest were sea creature atlases. Since I don't have a thing for scholarly books, I didn't have a version with scant pictures.

"No, not really. I did buy J*mp for a while, but now I just browse them in convenience stores."

"Really? I have a bunch of cooking manga in my room; you can borrow some."

"Thanks."

"Read up and become a house husband who would do all my chores!"

"You already have a daughter who claims to do things, go train her!"

"That reminds me, I have a friend who didn't read manga too. She's a girl though."

Meme-san reminisced while touching my books. She neglected me again… I'm getting used to it.

"There was also a person who ripped book pages to make puzzles. He made every book he borrowed from the library into puzzles — the librarian even cried."

"….."

I looked away, assuming the ignoring stance. Why did I participate in this immature fight? This 'big kid' was indeed lowering my mental age.

The self-made word has many ways of pronunciation, but I will read it as Daikyou. Sounds like Great Misfortune, not bad.[72]

"Okay, lets see what else is in Mako-kun's room! We'll start with the wallet, a.k.a the treasure. Then I'll get his passbook~ passwords later. Are there piggy banks? I'm going to smash them~"

"I don't want strangle my aunt, so please stop." I stopped ignoring her. Wait, this doesn't help.

Her act was, in a way, an invasion; I didn't want to cry to my sleep because I chose to keep quiet.

And Meme-san is the modern age video game heroine: she doesn't search the nooks or crannies, but goes straight for the expensive things. In other words, a thief. [73]

"Kidding! I already have Mako-kun's allowance in my bank account!"

Meme-san raised her hands above shoulder and beamed. This was probably the same as an animal showing you its stomach, like a sign of friendliness! Sometimes, looking at her behavior, I seriously wonder if she's drunk!

But I know one of my living problem is gone. If my allowance depends on my aunt, I'd have to be careful in what I say and do.

"So you wanted to play, but there isn't anything here." I sighed while holding my hair up, attempting to struggle.

"Aren't *you* here?" She answered with a brilliant smile.

"….." I really wanted to hear a girl my age say that. That way the Youth-points burrowed underground might actually see the sun.

Meme-san jaunted toward me. Wordlessly, she sat by my feet and looked up with an alluring smile. I… I don't plan on planting a flag here! Who's gonna try to sneak a peek at her boobs! Damn right, I was looking at something else. Like the pattern on her pajama. Meme-san had some weird pattern, like the suns that show up in heart-warming anime. It doesn't suit you!

Meme-san unleashed the towel on her hair, letting out her half-dried black hair. Probably because of the angle, her thirty-some year old appearance looked twenty.

"Sigh… I am shocked!"

Obliviously staring at the front of the room, she suddenly sighed.

"Sh-shocked about what?" Somehow my pitch changed.

"I actually have to work tomorrow. Life as an adult is just unbelievable."

"But… Isn't that normal?"

Today was Monday, but she talked like she was working overtime on her weekends.

"Well~ You aunt was a still student not too long ago~" She hugged her knees and rolled around in the room.

Disregarding the lies, she was simply complaining, "I don't wanna work~"

"Being a single mom sucks~ Yeah, I get to save money for one person, but there are times when I need more hands. Since I can't compare, I don't really know though."

In any case, this household lacks a father since the beginning.

"Do you really not know who Erio's father is?"

As the question did involve privacy, I softened the tone.

"Mm~..." She lay there, eyes and toes pointed at the ceiling. "Ah~ the light

hurts~" I'll pretend to not hear that. Since my aunt was mumbling to herself, I waited for a response.

"...Listen, Mako-kun." She spoke amidst the whisper. Does she actually have two tongues?

"Yes?" I just realized, Meme-san seemed to have settled on the name 'Mako-kun.'

"Right now, I have no bra!"

"I bet that has nothing to do with what we're talking about. Quick, get up."

"Nnwuu..." Meme-san flipped over; naturally, ignoring me. Our level of incommunicableness had traversed the level of planet, no, *gender*. [74]

Whether without comeback or had given up, I felt dizzy, not knowing what to say to her back.

Meme-san's mumbling stopped; her lips folded into a line. Her feet didn't leave the ground, and she tried to roll herself up like a Daruma doll. [75]

"Hold on, I'll use a calculator."

"...For what? Hey, for what?" Was Erio's father an electronic part?

"Papapa~" She opened my drawer and took out the calculator… Um, why does she know where it is? "Beep, beep, beep~" Meme-san clicked on the machine. It was like a novelist who doesn't quite know where the keys are, and has to use his index fingers… Hm, why did I draw such an analogy? Aliens? I best not to think about this anymore. [76]

"Um, I am two-thousand and two hundred… then six hundred. And then the first person was one thousand and seven hundred… no, next… from just the right side, maybe three thousand. He looked like a myna from the front. Not him either, his level wasn't enough. Then..."[77]

Back from work, the exhausted aunt grumbled as if possessed. She ceaselessly clicked away on the calculator with a serious look. Working into the middle of the night, how remarkable of her.

"All right~ I think I know who her dad is!" She raised her arms and threw the calculator to the side.

"With a calculator..."

"Me+Erio's father/2 = Erio. Isn't she super pretty? **Beautiful**~ Just like me~"

"I agree with the first part."

“So her material's looks must be great. I was counting the good-looking point of the men I was with before.”

“This only depresses me, sigh.”

She really likes being circuitous. Meticulous or irresponsible – she could be either.

Seriously, all she needed was to recall using the normal way. She should have at least liked the person for a bit.

“From the five most likely candidates, the most suspicious… Hm, it had to be the foreigner Elliot!”

“Isn't it easy to figure out from her name?” Then what was all that about?

“His good-looking point was about seven thousand and five hundred.”

“That's enough to destroy the earth!” Lets just keep talking to ourselves! I'm being ignored anyway!

“By the way, you are about two thousand, Mako-kun. You don't have to feel bad.

But I can't feel good either, right? Hearing the honest opinion from a female is a good thing, so I didn't refute.

“So~ her dad was Elliot, huh~ Ah, then she's mixed!”

There's a limit to playing dumb, I agreed in my mind infinitely… Ah, a mixed person! First I've seen! I didn't know being mixed would give your hair particles… Pretend you didn't hear that.

“But you totally knew where she came from!” Was I infected by my aunt? I have to be careful about how I talk now — especially around Ryuushi-san.

I think, depending on the situation, I could totally speak obscenely around Maekawa-san, but I still care about Ryuushi-san more.

“Look, do you *really* think your aunt could charm that many men at once?”

Her expression was like a kid's who stiffly confessed after having her mischief discovered by an adult.

“I haven’t seen you in your prime, so I wouldn't know.”

I jokingly shrugged. A twelve-year old picture is, after all, too early.

“I think I'm still young~” Though pouting, she still lowered her head.

"That guy was handsome, but I didn't think we'd make it far even if we lived together. We broke up, too, because our priority in life was different… or our values (?) were. So what I have now is the best! Ah~ but now I have to work my butt off! Uwah~"

Meme-san hugged her hung head and began struggling, but instantly looked up, invigorating herself.

"Oh well! Now I got Mako-kun. You can be my younger husband."

Her eyes squinted with a smile, looking straight at me. Uwah!

T-the Youth-point didn't move! In a way, it almost went down! My adolescence may be forced to have a period put on if I become too involved with this person!

"...So why did you come into my room?" I am *not* embarrassed. I may or may not be lying.

"Because we haven't been in sync recently, so I wanted to talk."

"Were we ever in sync…?"

Please, look at the previous pages filled with meaningless punctuation as references.

"See~ you're always like that. Mako-kun is so cold."

Meme-san pouted… See what I mean? (I sought the silent assent from my fictional readers)

"I bet you won't believe me, but they call me mushy at work!"

"Ohhh (your brain?)..."

"How come you drawled like that? How fascinating."

"The world is filled with fascinating things!" And without monsters!

The sea is an enigmatic treasure trove. For me, it is the most exciting place on this planet; rather than some famous art gallery or theme park, I'm more fervent about the ocean.

Ah, the universe counts as fantastical too. So does the girl next door to me.

"Oh, right." Meme-san clapped. And again. Clap, clap, clap, "Stop it."

Bluntly speaking, is she an idiot? I almost called my aunt a stupid kid.

My assessment for you is changing way too quickly.

“I don't ever come here, so let's play 'Old Maid.' I'm pretty darn good at it!”

Perhaps wanting to play cards since the start, Meme-san raised the cards she brought and spoke. Are we really doing this? A not-so-young aunt playing poker with a high schooler in the night… Poker Night — this made me think of some sort of magic trick. Usually adding 'Night' in a word makes it sound erotic, but this was refreshing.

“Just us? What about Erio?”

“No~way~ I wanna play with just Mako-chan.” Meme-san knocked on the floor with her ankles.

“I really want to say 'Shut up!' and 'Damn Brat!', but most importantly, don't call me Mako-chan.”

I have too many things to care for. Even my name is first come first served. What the hell!

In the end, me and my aunt played Old Maid. As opposed of the game's name, the family's daughter was not one of the two participants. [78]

Meme-san shuffled the cards while humming, her eyes glittering.

“Lets bet on something! If Mako-kun wins, I'll do anything.”

“… Wishes above my aunt's ability are impossible!”

That much I knew.

“My, I'm serious — I just don't have to lose!”

Meme-san calmly asserted. From her tone, the entire sentence seemed genuine.

“...What if I say I want a girl's panties?”

“Oh my~” She answered bashfully: “Mako-kun is so daring… Well, you are a guy after all! I guess I'll have to give you mine — no, give you some aid as well!”

“I mean a *girl's*.”

Please stop disregarding the key points of someone's sentences. Even though I was kidding about the panties, so I don't really care, I was actually angry with her.

“If you really wanted it that bad, couldn't you just go next door and take a few? Mako-kun, you're so weird.”

"Yeah, yeah, I'm weird, so let me say it: your brain is fried!"

Even though the night was tranquil, I screamed my throat out. If we lived in an apartment, our neighbors would definitely complain. Probably even ostracize us.

Meme-san finished shuffling; before she dealt the cards, I asked.

"...And? (それで？)"

"**De Lorean**~!" She raised her right fist. How annoying. [79]

"Shut your spinal reflex, please. I meant, what do you want if you win?"

I needed to make sure. My opponent was, after all, Touwa Meme-san.

I intentionally mentioned a preposterously embarrassing wish, but she tried to grant it. Gambling with a foe like this without drawing the line first is like running to my own death.

"Right, then…" Meme-san's eyes abruptly turned stern, and she spoke solemnly. "Break up with your girlfriend."

"I can't do things out of my power!" I yelled out the most authentic thing I'd said so far today.

"Ahahah, I might say something like that. Come on~ it'll be fun!"

She began dealing with a magnanimous smile that will accept — or rather, devour —everything.

There were only two people, so she totally could have just given me half the cards.

Though something was definitely off, my butt remained stuck on the chair.

☆

Speaking from just the result, it was a flawless defeat for me.

I lost completely.

For the first two times, I thought it was just bad luck.

Suspicion rose at the fourth round, and the consecutive defeats afterward mercilessly buffeted me.

As my losing streak made it to the twelfth, the tunnel vision from rage and dry-eyes recovered.

Something was off. Statistically speaking, this is impossible! This is a game

with a fifty-fifty chance of winning!

And Meme-san didn't even hesitate when she drew my cards, which directly affected her chance of winning. Even though everything besides pulling of the last two cards was routine, her motion hadn't changed since the start.

No matter how long I pondered, I would always grab the joker from Meme-san's last two cards.

She had to be cheating. I know it.

"...But knowing it now after losing so much is a bit late."

"I know, right?" Meme-san, who sat on my bed without permission, nodded in agreement.

The game of Old Maid finally ended after I admit defeat. Ironically, the first one to quit wasn't the old woman.

Since there were only two players, our battle tossed back and forth, proving indecisive.

"What did you do?"

Please stop rolling around my bed, I looked down at the scattered cards and thought. Dealing with emotion when discontent is especially difficult.

"Since you didn't see through me, I can't teach you. You're such a kind boy, Mako-kun; I'm worried about how gullible you are."

"...I don't know what to tell you." Actually, didn't you just deceive me?

"Here's a hint: Mako-kun agreed to play with my cards, and then let me shuffle and deal the cards. That's how you lost."

"So you *did* cheat!" Not just the cards, but also when you dealt them?!

"Alright, Mako-kun."

Meme-san climbed back up to a sitting position.

"...Don't call me that."

"Wha~? Why~?" Her fawning words shot out a beam of "why? Why?"

Ugaah~

I don't want to admit either, but it's because I almost grinned every time she called me that.

The woe of being a lonely high schooler. Even if it's just my aunt, the reaction is the same.

I am helpless against her brain-flattening voice.

The situation was already grave when I felt the attractiveness of an old woman.

I trampled onto the Youth-point that peeked from underground, demanding it to reflect on it's lack of chastity.

“Cuz it sounds like a girl's name.”

I made up an excuse and freeze the case.

“So what~?” She glossed over with a smile, “C'mere, let's talk~” and pat the spot next to her.

“Uh.” Don't come so close to a high school guy so nonchalantly, especially on his bed. I thought 'please let me go' while feeling overly conscious, and looked away. I felt dumb, somehow.

On the other hand, my aunt, who is less than sheepish, was waving innocently at me, telling me to come closer. I didn't want to be teased after being seen through, so I answered the summon with a calm face… Ah.

I wanted to be further away, but I miscalculated the distance and sat down extremely near her; our outer thighs were touching. 'Get away!' I thought, but it'd be unpleasant if I was misinterpreted of having weird thoughts, so I lifted my chin and put on a stoic face. Though it was an easily-popped balloon of a bluff.

“...What are we talking about?”

Giving my neighbor a glance, I intentionally asked callously.

I saw Meme-san's mother-like face, and I felt embarrassed every time we met eyes.

Looking closely, her skin was very well-kept for her age, so I inadvertently compared her to mom.

For a brief second, even Meme-san's hair appeared to shoot particles, but then —

“…...Eh?”

She embraced me.

The first time in my life ever hugged by a female.

By someone who was twenty-three years older than I.

For a normal high schooler, it may just be something to be forgotten in the future — but things always depend on the other party.

At least for me, who faced Meme-san, I almost actually stopped breathing.

The points! My Youth-points are being sucked away! Were if not for…

"If you're getting close to Erio because of her looks, give up. If you are that desperate to find a girl, go find a different person. Don't come near Erio if you're doing it out of personal interest."

"Eh? Ah… Uh..." Now isn't the time for that! Save the serious things for later!"

"Hm? Mako-kun?"

"Uh, no, um… I was just shocked from being hugged all of the sudden."

The throat that was twitching too hard from nervousness calmed down, but the arms and hands were still in spasm, and my muscles hurt as if ripped.

"Oh, I see. Your heart is racing." My pulse, too, was hurrying to the next life.

She moved her hand that was on my back to my chest, checking my heartbeat. Meme-san's finger tip subtly drew on my shirt and tickled. Is it okay if I describe the act as bewitching? As the stain on the opposite wall saw the scene, I wanted to splash paint and revamp the wall.

"Uhh, soo..."

"Yes."

"Why are you hugging me?"

"It just happened!"

Please don't do this.

As I couldn't rebuke her, I shut up and focused on suppressing my heart's throb. Adjusting my breath, I made sure to not think about the hair that carelessly brushed my neck and the gentle caress of her skin. I glared at the wall's stain, abiding my time to solve the problem.

“Have you calmed down?”

She read the heart report from her hand, confirming whether she could keep talking.

“I guess I'm used to it now.” Human adaptability is not to be underestimated, and I feel empty.

Whether happiness or sadness, once habituated, the degree of emotional effects diminishes.

Sooner or later everyone's heart would be flat, even if the individual process deviates.

“Should I say it again?”

“Please.” I'm not trying to make word count meet, because this isn't a novel. Hm!

“If you're getting close to Erio because of her looks, give up. If you are desperate to find a girl, go find a different person. Don't come near Erio if you're doing it out of personal interest.”

“Is this what you came to say?”

You seriously copy-pasted what you just said, what a lazy person. Oh no, I don't mean Meme-san.

“Mm, yes, because I can't let it go on anymore. That's why I'm here to advice you.”

“...I can't just accept it, even if you tell me that.”

Firstly, I tried choosing 'no.' I couldn't see her intention, neither did I want to obey.

“Why? Do you really think it's too much of a shame to give up on a girl like Erio?”

“…...” Sigh, is this called bullseye? That's what most people would have thought.

“I'll be blunt: If Erio's looks were below average, I bet you wouldn't take the time to walk around in the night with a girl like that.”

“I won't deny that.”

The more I reject the notion, the more obscure the humane intent would seem. I am no saint, and I don't live for some enlightenment. I am what is

known as a humble man.

"Then give up. There must be some other girls in your class you like?"

Meme-san rested her chin on my shoulder and began her investigation.

"No. I've only been here for two weeks, so not really." Liar.

"How about the girl sitting next to you?" My heart skipped a beat. "Then what about the girl sitting to the right behind you?" Wait a minute!

Meme-san knew? No way, she's probably bluffing. Now isn't the time to complain and inadvertently give everything away.

Luckily, she stopped talking about my friends and regressed back to the topic on hand.

"Or, do you only like Erio?"

"I'm not doing this because I like Erio!"

She, however, was making me uneasy. As for the reason, I sensed that it was divulged not too long ago.

"Then why are you always around her?"

"I am intrigued by her… That's one of the reasons, but..." As for the other causes, I'll just let them drift!

I don't want to do anything to her, but I didn't want to admit that the biggest impetus was my curiosity for her.

"She wants to be alone if possible, just respect her decision."

Meme-san's apathetic words reflected the image of complete despair. Her hands grasped tightly onto my shirt as she spoke.

"That's why you try to ignore Erio's existence?"

"Right."

"But you love her so much — that ball chair must have cost a fortune."

"Oh, the chair? She said she needed it, so I spent four years saving up for it. It has to be the most expensive furniture in the house."

I thought so too. Everything in my room combined must pale in comparison to its price.

"But just giving her things is not good enough — she needs family. Parents are the closest people a kid could have.

"Even though your aunt thinks that for Erio, I am not a bad mother..."

Nonchalant and mischievous; she is, however, a good mother where it counts… Um, doesn't this count as 'gap-moe?' Of course not!

"But not having the preparation and resolution to raise a child before having one… That's not what a good parent would do."

"….."

"Things are never smooth, even if the mentality is to deal with problems as they come. My parents too: they weren't rich, yet they had too many kids, and everyone suffered because of that. Those kind of misery doesn't get even out — everyone has to shoulder the same weight."

Only the last words mutely washed by my ears, flimsy and frail like re-steeped tea.

Held by Meme-san, I had the illusion of being crushed under the very same weight.

"My parents don't seem to know Erio's existence."

If they knew, would they have sent me here?

"I kept quiet; I don't keep in contact with the family anyway."

"Glad it wasn't discovered."

"...Frankly, I don't really remember when I had her. Or maybe it's like my memory when I was pregnant was vague… By the time I realized, she was already in the house… that's how I think sometimes."

...Alien. Her origin may be related to how she was raised.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I don't want even the relatives to badmouth her, calling her a bastard child."

"...Eh?" Surprising. No, not really?

Or do I just not know her enough?

"We digressed a bit. Mako-kun, you don't have to help Erio with her suffering. If you do, I will actually beat you both."

She flexed her fingers and prepared to claw my skin.

"Do you get it now?" Smiley face ☆

"I'll think about it later." Grin ☆

"Munch~~" She bit my neck. "Gah!" Goose bumps. What was that on my back?

As if declaring the end of conversation, Meme-san held my shoulder and pushed me away. "Hm." Like ending a segment, she nodded. The heat from her early shower dwindled, and the blush on her cheeks receded to normal.

"Let's bunk together!"

"Please go back now. What time do you think it is now anyway?"

I pushed Meme-san's back and got her off the bed. "I thought maybe Mako-kun is lonely~!"

"Man, aren't *you* the lonely one?"

Arbitrarily, I answered saying that. Unexpectedly, Meme-san's face was serious:

"Perhaps."

She picked up the towel and cards, and then head to the door:

"Thank you for spending time with me. Night, Mako-kun."

"You too. Good night."

Meme-san waved, gave her usual smile, and then left.

For reasons unknown, I seem to plant the most flags with my aunt:

"...Sigh~"

Is this what it feels like to have your girlfriend's parents' disapproval?

Oh boy, I don't have even the slightest of a crush for Erio.

Admiring Erio from head to toe, extolling her like an art piece is the true pleasure. I don't want to make direct contact with her.

"Oh, Erio's underwears are located on the second drawer from the top."

Someone came back and gave a laughable advice.

"Thanks for the unnecessary earth-intel, Iseijin (異性人)."

Go back now, shoo.

"….."

I went out to the hall, making sure Meme-san was gone. Good. I ran back

into the room.

I lied down and took a big whiff.

Anything? I thought, even though I felt ashamed having such perverted thoughts.

...Um, not really.

“I just showered, and I have no make-up on, so there shouldn't be any smell!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

I screamed with the force of two hundred frogs being crushed simultaneously. I backed up, the back of my head banged on the wall.

“Your brain's going to turn into Takoyaki, Mako-kun.” [80]

“W-w-warp?! Where did your footsteps go?!”

“I hid… no, I went to Erio's room to see her sleeping face. And then Mako-kun… Kyah~!”

“Gahhhhhhhhh!!”

Meme-san's got my weakness, and I made yet another memory I want to kill myself for.

☆

During childhood, I had pet rocks… Of course, I meant mineral rocks.

I put black, white and shiny rocks into a bug box, and I watered them at times.

Its *not like I believed that things have hearts, I just didn't know the difference between the living and the the inorganic.*

Because of that, I experienced many losses and grief, and became who I am.

Like ephemeral pictures in a dream, I recalled the memory.

Alright, it's Tuesday tomorrow. Like adults who have to go to work, students also have to go to the depressing school.

In the school of city, students with blonde or brown-dyed hair ravaged the classrooms like beasts, making trouble for others… Intimidation and extortion were common during recess. I used to think that, but no one skipped out on classes, and nobody put his or her feet on the desk. Everyone walked together when we change to chemistry class; everyone opened his or her notebooks,

getting ready to take notes from the blackboard to prepare for the exams.

Being no exception, I scribbled on the notebook as well, but the content wasn't the chemistry that I studied halfway yesterday. If I must say, it was about the life and ethics of the possibility that grade schoolers may be learning the same thing as well.

"….."

Pretty girl who was normal until high school↓

Sudden disappearance two months after enrolling↓

Not even she knew why↓

Sudden return after half a year. According to herself, she was floating in the sea after she woke up↓

Apprehension for the amnesia of the past six months↓

Unable to stand the stares of others, blames aliens, which she was already interested in, as a way to escape reality↓

Stubbornly insists herself as an alien, and became a deviant↓

Flew with a bike from a river, with the obvious consequence of falling into the river. Got sick↓

Dropped out, became a NEET who eats pizza weirdly. Still cute though.

I wrote down the concept map of Erio's history. It's something like thats. Man, a stereotypically dangerous person right here. And she wasn't even brainwashed by some new religions. Unbelievable.

The problem roots in 'memory' and 'aliens.' I circled the two words. The last straw of Erio's peace of mind stems from the belief in the extraterrestrials. And so she looked for traces of aliens in the town, earnestly searching for that which knowing adults made television specials for. But she knew, at the bottom of her heart, that all this was a farce. From our interaction thus far, I felt for sure that there is room for intervention.

As for her memory, I literally cannot do anything. Erio often goes back to where she was found; if she can't remember anything, then there isn't much I could do either. It is impossible to trace Erio's steps in the past half-year, unless it's someone of an organization or with investigative ability like the police or detective. Besides, if the search ends with no answer, the theory that Erio was kidnapped by aliens will only thicken and lead her toward the wrong direction. She might finally break free of the mantle and reach the zone beyond logic and

consciousness. That way, she will even stop pretending to be an alien.

Then, the only thing I can do is to crush the alien.

I will kill that illusion of yours… No, wait, I'm not the hot-blooded character~ Then what am I?...What is individuality?...No, I do have characteristics! I am not some wet sponge! Dammit, if this goes on, I won't even be qualified to sympathize with a certain particle (粒子). I will not end like the primrose! [81] I got it! I know a lot about deep-sea animals! So that makes me Shingyu-san!

So it still came down to this, huh? That's still as bad as flower! Fish & flower, **Fish and Flower**! Oh, that sounds pretty neat!

Kinda like the title of western song, or like the name of a dish. Such as **Fish and Chips**.

My partner Ryuushi-san, who returned to my diagonal rear in the classroom we move to, was avidly scribbling away on a notebook. Neither my gaze nor the teacher's voice could intrude her artist's soul.

Lets see. The 'first dimension' consisted of just a single line. A strangely well-drawn primrose, 'second dimension.' A carrot that somehow had limbs and a humble smile was 'third dimension.' 'Fourth dimension' with only a watch. With 'Japanese history' written on its head, 'fifth dimension.' Does it refer to the fifth period today? Lastly, an old woman with mangled face showcasing a key chain with geometric design: 'sixth dimensional granny.'

Is that the grocery store lady Meme-san told me about on my first day of moving here? But if Meme-san's information was right, a dimension seemed to be missing. If you ask who I trust more, both option A and B would be Ryuushi-san; if it weren't for her getting close to me after taking a bath and hugging me, who the hell would trust her… Oh, but Meme-san is exceptional when it comes to threatening people!

"Uwah..." At the moment, I loathed the adolescent that permeated me. Why the hell did I do that?! I lost to curiosity at the time… Well, to be honest, I do have desires. Nevertheless, I will never be able to defy my aunt. Even ten years from now on, I bet she will still talk about it.

"...Hm?"

Unknowingly, I met Ryuushi-san's eyes, and the painter's hand stopped. I focused on her irises, and the confusion embarrassed her.

Perhaps confident in her own drawings, her gave a bashfully faint smile.

Ryuushi-san improvisedly drew 'shingyu-san' next to the sixth dimensional granny. No matter I how I looked at it, it looked like a fishman.

I glossed over with a courtesy smile and an imitation of gill-breathing, turning back like a fishman climbing onto the shore. I'll talk about being partner with her later.

Like a cicada fresh out from its shell, Meme-san's warning/advice from yesterday bugged me.

Quit messing with her because of her look, Meme-san said so. It is just as she said, I only took on Erio's strange hobby because of the peerlessly exquisite face inside the futon.

If that person's gender was the opposite, even if she were air, I'd treat her like carbon dioxide. Thus, her astute opinion — as occasional as it is — as an elder and a parent should be taken as a whole. Living in segregation — perhaps it would be for the best.

The reason for that would be how smooth life is now. In just two weeks, my new life has surpassed every bit of my expectation; I should even abandon the person who needs to experience life and move on. I met Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san: the deficit caused by the Touwa's has been offset, and I am in the position where I could see the rising trend in the future.

Why do I prioritize in getting myself involved with Erio, the culprit of my lost points? Rationality questioned. It makes perfect sense, really. But I abandoned logic in reality, becoming closer to Erio, and started caring for Erio.

Touwa Erio calls herself an alien; she claims to able to fly, and she asserted that she came to evaluate the human race. But none of it is true. To hide the abnormality of her own action, she buried herself in the futon.

Her way of living is a testament of how lonely she is; yet, she can never be two people, and she can't live without another person.

This way of living with the premise of being saved by others angers me.

I should just imitate her mom, and ignore this cousin of mine. Of course, it should just conclude like that.

I shut the book and closed my eyes. The bang that covered my eyebrows when I hung my head agitated me.

…But still, looking at Erio pains me somewhere in the heart.

It's like… Someone who couldn't read between the lines: someone who

decides to be drowning in the corner of my eyes when I'm happily playing catch with someone else by the riverbank.

Swallowing this feeling, keeping it in my stomach and living an indigestive life might trigger gastritis some days. I can't accept Meme-san's advice and defer to her.

I'm pissed.

I can't stand the pessimistic attitude she believes the existence of aliens with.

That nonnegligible negativity is more conspicuous than the alacrity of success or smooth-sailing.

Mystery should be hopeful. Just like imagining the unknown sea creatures that excited me no matter how old I am, they are an existence that should promote progress. It doesn't matter if it's human, skyfish or the Greys. [82]

She sullied the mysteries, filling her past with them, using them as a means to secure her own footing. Touwa Erio does not deserve to be called an Earthling, from how I see it.

I feel deeply from her the flaw that no beauty can ever compensate for.

But she is no alien, no — she is a shell devoid of identity, but instead filled with simple yearning for heterogeneousness.

So—

So~ I don't know what's going to happen.

Only, I'll deal with what I can't stand now.

"Alright~ Alright~ Alright~"

Al—right.

☆

I snuck out of school after first period ended.

Since it's too apparent if I took it, I left my backpack in the class.

Carefully avoiding the teachers, I jogged to the shoe lockers, the parking lot and to my bicycle. I scanned around one more time and escaped the school.

Unlike usual, I took the long way home. This was the first time I ever skipped school like this, pretty nice. Two points to Youth.

Aside from going to school, I don't get many chance to ride in the morning.

As I chose an unfamiliar path, I sort of got lost and spent a bit of stamina. I got back before third period started, however. Right about now, how would my classmates and teacher assess the fact that I was gone?

Ryuushi-san will definitely talk about this all day tomorrow! Am I thinking like this because of over self-consciousness?

I opened the door without shutting it, took off the shoes and went upstairs.

I passed my room, found the person who was naturally lying there, and walked over.

I grabbed the futon-girl (every time I see her, I just want to deep fry her to make tempura) and commanded.

It was rude, but I felt freaking great.

“Fly with me, right now. If you can't, you'll become human.”

- リュウシさんと初デート。 +3
- 叔母さんに初ハグを奪われる。 −5
- 学校を途中で抜け出した。 +2

現在の青春ポイント合計 −4

- First date with Ryuushi-san: +3
- First hug stolen by my aunt: -5
- Leaving school halfway: +2

Youth-Point Total: -4

五章『地を這う少女の不思議な刹那』

Chapter Five - The Impossible Moment of the Crawling Girl

In the beginning of each semester back in my old school, the teachers would check our bicycles.

For examples, if the headlights worked, the stickers were school appropriate, or brakes were ok… The school arranged teachers to especially examine the bikes after school's out. It was nosy — even more so, since it's mandatory.

From the angle of someone who doesn't go to a club, it's was being forced to line up for teachers to check one bike at a time after school when you want to play around before going home. And it was outside.

April: trample on the fallen cherry blossom; September: death by the sun. And January: chattering teeth in the cold.

Complaints from the athletes department also rose when the field was swarmed with bikes.

In the past, the softball club even began batting practices, apparently aiming volley of balls at the teachers. Some guy made two goals. He'll probably become an official member of the team after becoming a second year. The only problem was his victim: the softball club adviser.

If they found problems like a broken bell or a rocket engine attached on the bike, they'll even check again. Thus, no one forgets to fix his or her bike the day before. Basically, the goals of the staffs were already accomplished at that moment. This feeling is like sheep being chased by a shepherd dog. I disliked that pompous attitude.

How many years ago was it when I took the initiative to fix my bike? Occasionally I refill the tires, but sweating and trying hard to derust the bike must be a first.

Dragging my rusty transport out of the storage, I gave my best to revert it back to its former glory.

I even bought a rust removing spray from the mart to polish the frame. Man, it's not working! As if cleaning the bloodstain displayed on a TV screen, it was fruitless.

It would actually be faster I borrowed Meme-san's working bike, but it's probably more economical with the crappy one, since it's going into the Mother

of Life — the sea. I also don't want to feel the wrath of viewers.

I don't believe one bit that she can fly. Wahahahaha.

Even if she had a bike like this.

I finally remembered where I've seen this. This bicycle painted in legendary red-and-white color indeed soared in the sky. With the backlit moon, it flew with an alien in its basket.

It's the movie 'E.*'[83]. What I was fixing was the very same bike used in that movie. I remember seeing it in the twentieth anniversary edition during elementary school.

I could easily picture the Cosmophile, Erio, begging Meme-san to buy this expensive and limited replica of the bike. She treasures her daughter, no matter what she may say.

Just a glance at her pair of model-like, scarless hands with perfect nails confirmed the theory.

Lady Erio stood on the side without words or questions, watching someone else sweating to fix her bicycle. The azure sky contrasted well with the contrail; she stood barefoot on the grass, emitted subtle particles and formed a landscape painting of a realized fantasy creature. She held the hair that flew in the air — just to my taste.

...Eh? I was suppose to censure her, so why was the content full of adulation? ...Oh well.

I'll be a man who values the inside more, and give up on derusting. I touched the chain that may snap at any moment; I pressed on the center — it was loose. Incredible how it held out all this time.

Flying on this bike was of course out of the question. Even the cosmic power of the extraterrestrial won't be enough to make up for this junk's inadequacy. Wait, the bike should have been working at that time: it only looks like this because of the accident. Anyway, the bike doesn't matter — aliens should be able to levitate with their own feet. I guess they like to show off too!

I took out the dusty tools stuffed inside the shed, earnestly playing my role of a substitute bicycle-chiropractor. Since I left school, the time went from morning to noon, and my hands never stopped the unending tasks.

The hell am I doing? I'm tired of hearing my own question. It's like forcing myself to listen to the same vocabularies during sleep with a speaker pillow for twenty hours. The brainwashing probably already caused hearing difficulty.

This was purely an endurance battle between me and Erio. Do I admit her alien status? Or do I shut her down to an Earthling? We shoved each others from our respective mindset, not budging one bit. For illustrations, just imagine fighting for spots for flower viewing!

We weren't thinking for each other: we just want to forcefully carry out our own ideals. This was a fight of egoism. I won't give her the excuse of having inadequate equipment — be completely crushed by the gravity of Earth!

As for the upgrading of bicycle parts, I didn't want the knife of 'being broke' to further stab into my stomach, so I finished with just a pumped tire and swapped chain.[84]

I walked inside to wash my face in the restroom, dried off the water and sweat with a towel, then went back into the yard.

"Oi, E.T. (The acronym for Erio Touwa)."

Erio's fine dress swayed in the zephyr, and she looked like the daughter of nobility. I ordered her.

Her gaze was fixed on the grasshoppers beneath, and then she looked up silently:

"….."

Me? She pointed to herself, the meaning revealed from the act. Yes, you.

"Get in the basket. You like that better, right?"

Speaking of which, the back seat on this bike was removed. Is it coincidental, or intentional? It isn't impossible to have another person stand on the back using the footstand, but it's more thrilling to imitate the movie.

This is what they called Role Playing. Maybe it's better named reversely.

"I won't say this is never done before, but it's definitely hell lot more uncommon for people to fly on bikes. Even though I hoped it'd look more official, but… This is what we get!"

I stroked the frame's rust mark with my palm. The sensation was terrible, and gave me goosebumps:

"If you can fly, just fly all the way back to space!"

And find somewhere to drop me off too.

You heard me — even the sea's fine. Even if I lose my memory, it's fine.

Erio's nodded slowly. Her act of jaw clenching was not out of doubt or

cowardice, but of fortitude. Her lips formed a line, silent yet revealing of will.

And we reached consensus. First, Erio entered the white basket. The large-sized basket devoured her with its mouth gaping toward the sky. Putting life into the bike is the job of an alien.

Touwa Erio.

If you don't have the proof of being the Amazonian alien, then show me yourself![85]

Prove the existence of aliens.

Prove what you've lost half a year ago was taken by the aliens.

I stepped onto the bike, my destination no longer needing navigation.

The route to find the laughable trace of alien, paved in the rue of Erio — the road toward the ocean.

Disregarding the impetus of its user, the bike kept going at its own pace. Awesome.

The speed didn't change~ like a loyal puppy, I obeyed my personal goal for the day: “save energy.”

The bike that was resurrected, almost covered with my own hand grimes, tediously maintained the usual speed that I lose to Ryuushi-san with; it killed any premonition of escaping the daily life.

Did something abnormal happen to the interior of the bike that an amateur can't see? Maybe the inside is all incorrigible.

In any case, the speed wasn't enough for flying off the cliff. We'll just fall off if we ride like this toward the bluff; we'll totally die if we bump into the rocks all the way down.

“Oi, self-proclaimed Alien, use the acceleration device in your molar.”

“…...”

Was she ignoring me, or simply speechless? The two reactions are close in effect, but the attitude diverges acutely. Erio did not look around, constantly focused to the front. I wonder what was going through her mind.

The me who originally went at the pedal turned to cruise control to save energy — also to prevent the loss of stamina in this comical spiritual battle.

This is a chicken fight: a fight to see who will seriously fly into the sea before Erio yields.

How horrifying! Bungee jumping without the cord has to be the extremity of fear for acrophobes. It is a heroic act even among these dreadful situations — the pinnacle of suicide.

If we let our youthful life end here in this stupid challenge, scientists are going to moan about the detriment of edutainment. Who's dying?! I clenched my jaws. Who's going to let her die?! The hands that gripped the handlebars flowed with power.

I will speed toward the cliff, slow down right after Erio shows her fear for death, change the route to back home, and then give her the certificate of an Earthling… that was the schedule.

The bike maintained it's speed to where we could see the ocean. The target slope with the perfect distance for flight had about two hundred meters left.

After the downhill was a slight inclination to the coastal road on the side. Essentially, it could be used as a ramp. The road does have a railing to prevent cars from going off, but it's probably scalable with disregard to slowing down and braking.

Just do the exact opposite of how normal people ride.

Not to mention the premise of speed. The me now had no help for speed gain. If the rider was a grade schooler who just took off the assistant wheel, the bike's way would be kinda cute — for a high school second year though, the bike's just a target for snickering. My ride had no sign for a mad dashing, even though I'm booming with youth — and that, is where the problem is.

Going down the hill will simply result in an extra lump of metal on the rail. Worst case scenario, the energy will send Erio into the sea, leading to a tragic ending.

Even my first time riding a bicycle was a little faster than this.

How could you lose having two wheels? To encourage the bike, I flicked the broken bell. The frail ring sounded as if saying, “avoid confrontation~” like an antisocial, grumbling NEET. I felt my waning determination's return as I pedaled on.

I'm not someone who would shamelessly go home without a putting up a fight.

The fact that I went through the trouble of skipping school made me struggle on.

I pedaled with all my strength, attempting to accelerate.

Imagining the exercise bike at a gym, I smiled wryly at the empty feeling beneath my feet. Eh?

The first loop was heavy. It took a while for me to realize the 'anomoly.'

I half-stood, maintaining the posture and biked.

The wind suddenly picked up.

"Oh?" Oh...Oh, oh?

Considering the structure of bicycle, this is but natural.

Fully stepping on the pedal equals superior speed.

Common sense returned.

The wheels and the pedal's link was revived, giving me the praise my hard work deserves.

My conscience was the only thing confused; the pedals spun at an amazing speed, under the guidance of inertia.

The speed between the bicycle and its friends were already abnormally fast by the time I slowed down my cycling.

In my mind, I saw the last light before a candle is blown out.

W-wait a minute, at this speed, we might actually not… Stop!

The brake's whacked I forgot to check!

Sensei, check my bike!!

"Uwahhh!!"

We are on track! We'll definitely die if we run into the sides! Can I stop? Stick my feet out? Yes, do it! This is bad! Ah, my shoe's gone! It's gone to the wood after a few bounces! And the bike didn't even slow down! Hills are scary! Scarier than manju's[86]! Erio even stuck her body out! Since it's came to this, use telepathy! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop; I'm serious too. I'll stop the car. Stop time[87]! Stop, stop, stop, stooooooooop!

We are getting close! The goal at the end, the rail and the sea! Three on three?!

"…Right! Ah… Um…!"

Erio said something! I can't hear! She yelled, almost falling out of the basket!

Fly! Ocean, rail, ah~ ah~ ah~ It's too laaaaaa – !

It's! Too! Late!

And thus: "I can't flyyyyyyyy!!!"

I stomped! Stomp! More!

Five poooooooints!!

Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhyieh! Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar! Whoosh!

" 'Uwaaaaaaaaaahyeeeeeeh!!!' "

Sounds like my voice is overlapping with someone elseeeeeeeeeeee's!

Using the technique of a wheelie performance, I lifted the head of the bike to scale the rail; the end of the crossroad at the bottom of the hill became the ramp!

The pedals regained freedom and let go of their duty! Spin! Sky! My body left the seat and flew above the bike!

The wheel's freaky noise resonated, burning into my eardrums!

"Extreme happiness" was enough to describe the sensation of breaking the air barrier.

Our background music wasn't the sound of vibrating wings, but instead the noise of a passing car.

We held onto the speed of sound, leaning forward in attempt to surpass it, finally defying gravity.

In a world unrelated to earth, a bike and two people flew in the air.

It's not a plane or a rocket: primitive science crossed the boundary.

We swam fatefully in the air.

Conscience and situation were instantly surrounded by azure.

I'm flying.

I'm flying.

I'm flying. "I'm flying!" That's right, I am flying! Still flying!

"Ah~Ha~Ha~Hahhhhhhhhwuiiiiiiiiiik!!" I am falling.

Gravity began its domination when we reached the apex. The bastard that was slapped by our momentary acceleration swung its gigantic palm down,

swatting the traitors that ignored the speed of sound and light.

Time felt long during the jump, yet the fall was but a moment. Descent. The word didn't even make it past the spine; I didn't even have time to reflexively blink. The wind might have ambushed around my ears, but the incoming sea surface occupied my nerves.

The first to eat it was the person who lost her status as 'alien.'

Like a cannon ball, Erio held her knees and pounced first into the water.

I saw sparkles; after she disappeared into the water, the bike and I also finished submerging.

Impact beyond imagination buffeted everywhere on my flesh. Water, too, assaulted my weakness from every angle, torturing my body by waves.

The sound of me crashing awkwardly into the sea rang in my skull. Ignoring space distribution, bubbles burst from my mouth, eating away at the strength of my limbs. I sunk gradually. Someone told me people float in the water if they don't struggle, but I was sinking lazily!

Only if I could store wax like deep-sea animals.

Is this how diving into a different world feels?

My near-numb conscience obliviously remarked on what was happening.

The bike already left my grip, possibly keeping on the attack not too far ahead. It won't come back up, and will probably become the new homes or nests for fishes in the future. Will it hate me? At least the hatred will be split among me and Erio, right? Cuz she lied, right?

…… I started moving. The speed of decent slowed, and my sunken body no longer numb. The swimming begins.

"Pwah! Cough, cough!" Without hesitation, I spat out precious oxygen and changed stance.

I turned, searching the source of light to face upward.

Opening my eyes in the fumed and dirty water, I attempted to find the silhouette of Erio. Actually, opening your eyes in the sea without goggles is not likely. Still, I pushed on.

Nothing else is dumber than dying while struggling to live!

As my face edged close to spasm from suffocation, my bleared view located a pair of legs that floated vertically onto the sea. Seems like Erio's already at the

surface, so I don’t have to stay here anymore. I relaxed my unmoving right arm, and power-stroked with my left.

For better or worse, my fading conscience from the lack of oxygen tranquilized my body. Since there was a dearth of nutrient for fear, I was forced to maintain a calm state of mind. I will live on without anxiety.

My face easily pierced the surface, and I began floating. Water expulsed from my nose and mouth dripped into my lungs, choking as I puked water. I didn't even have time to breathe.

My temple twitched; the blood vessels in my brain near exploding.

The content may be water, but the sound effect was undoubtedly that of vomiting.

Trying to play badass any more could kill me; I will puke without a second thought even in front of a girl.

Erio, who rose before I did, was still coughing, but it would appear she's done with getting rid of the sea water. Breathing in too much air would actually cause more choking.

For a while, we coughed incessantly, paying the price for our bravado.

As my body habituated to the spring sea that was colder than a just-opened swimming pool, I caught my breath. Hair drenched in water stuck to my skin, covering my vision.

To avoid the one of us from being washed away, I naturally held Erio's left hand.

Erio's finger tips were the same warmth as the sea water. They are, however, very tangible.

“Oi, pretend-alien, how does the sea of Earth taste?”

“It tastes salty, and the service was terrible.”

Head hung, she spouted the misplaced words of a food critic.

She did, however, spoke in proper Japanese.

With fingers that I couldn't felt, I pull Erio closer and clamped her left hand:

“Anyhow, you sure sucked! Never mind space, you won't even make it to Enoshima[88].”

“This is all the fault of the secretary: I have nothing to do with it.”

“Haha! That doesn't change the fact that you failed! I may be the culprit, but I don't give a crap.”

I laughed, and water once again filled my mouth. Not only that, Erio even splashed water at me with her empty right hand.

Simply put, I was splashing water with a girl by the beach! It should have been. Hmm, I guess we were literally, but the realistic development was kind of off. Is this how a victim of an elaborate scam feels?

“Well, I'm getting better at being delinquent too! Like skipping schools and going to the beach and stuff. My Youth-points are skyrocketing! The inflation is real!”

“How dare you talk like that, when you should be going for niche stuff like this with your guy friends.”

Somehow she seemed acquainted with the scoring criteria. Would this happen to be an international standard?

“Also, I'm not a student anymore — I've graduated from adolescence.”

Erio corrected as she flicked her soaked hair unto her shoulders. Even when wet, her hair still emitted particles; in my eyes, this was the most vibrant so far.

“I don't mean that… sigh, I was talking about going to the beach normally. Something like this...” I turned to scan around.

The ocean diffused endlessly.

Hard to imagine that there are continents and islands in the horizon of the sea.

The magnitude of the sea even brought me despair of unbelonging.

It is both blue and endless.

Erio pointed to the far horizon.

“Let's go there!”

“Why? Hell no, I don't like sharks.”

“Lets find an island and live there together!” Her eyes were muddled; they scared me.

“Screw that! I would hate a world with just you and me! We aren't Adam and Eve! And Adam was only willing to compromise because there was only Eve! He actually prefers pin-up girls with bigger chests! I still have Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san!”

“Uwah~ He's not letting go of the flags[89] that are frailer than a P*cky[90] stick!”)

“And what makes you think you can shut down my tiny hope? And with capsule made of jargon?”

“I'm done with that.”

Erio muttered calmly, wiping the water away from her cheeks.

The water on her face was swept away, yet the droplets from her palms never stopped. They didn't even serve as temporary drying solution.

Plight signifying her problems in life seemed to expand on Erio's face.

“Also, what's the meaning of this?”

Her purple lips trembled lightly; her pale skin suffused with bits of sanguine.

“By that you mean?”

“For the cousin, what is the meaning of doing this?”

On our linked hands, Erio's nails dug into my finger joints. Just that was enough to make it felt like the soggy skin was peeling off:

“Must I provide something like a reason or motivation?”

“Of course.”

She answered immediately and stabbed me with her fingers, telling me to hurry…

What a pain~ That's my actual thought.

Since I decided on a whim, I didn't care about what would happen afterward. Even now, I still don't know my intention.

Like choosing a future career, my impulsive youth was troubled with the direction of the future.

I have to add in some motives that came later.

If my answer doesn't pass, she might return to the sea — literally.

What was it… Oh yeah, that. The first time I met Ryuushi-san.

Just like this, toes tipped.

“Get along with everyone~” Since I wasn't too confident in my cuteness, I left the 'oh~” in my heart.

"Huh?"

Erio froze. How rare, but how cute. Both the value of this occasion or the cause for this reaction were satisfying.

“It's the human ideal! I decided to go for this first, so I don't have to worry about other things!”

“Sounds like bull~”

Erio's gave the look of smelling something sour and stuck her tongue out.

“Yeah, right! Since I'm going to living in your house, I want everyone to get along. Isn't it natural?” I kept thinking that I sounded more suspicious.

The sound of my teeth clenching drowned in the waves.

“I'm an alien! I should know how to fly! No, I can definitely fly! Just a bit! Three miles! At least I am certified! But I have to admit! An Earthling defeated me! Why? No, I know why! I don't know why!”

Erio pretended to be mental and in denial, and the lines I tossed out were,

“You deserve it… I will definitely be the bad guy if I say that.”

Thus, I said nothing.

If you're normal now, it's up to yourself! This way would be the only acceptable for her as well.

“The fact that we've became friends is terrible! The relation between the different planets have been ruined by the cousin! My command post is destroyed, and I'm soaked. Your triumphant smug is also in violation of several space agreement!”

Both outer space and Earth Miss Erio were conflicted, busily going back and forth between the stratosphere. It's time for you to give up on life without gravity.

But was my expression really like that? If I have to say it, I thought I was just grinning.

“There isn't a perfect relationship in this world that would hurt no one from start to end!”

Because of someone's evil arrangement, meetings are always paired with departure.

“...I don't get what you mean.”

She callously pointed out. Mm, the plan to gloss things over with pretty words failed.

“Anyway, nothing is final yet. Cuz, this is our first day meeting each other.”

At the right time, I lifted my right index finger to jab the oblivious Erio… Eh? I can't move my arm. Oh well, it's probably being rebellious like its owner!

I don't need body language. I'll use my eyes and mouth to explain clearly, cleverly impose my geniality!

This is the biggest weapon for those peace lovers who wish for people to get along:

"Is this your second time to Earth? I'll start selling settlement pizza next time."

"….." A solemn face. In other words, the stubborn expression that will explode into tears with the lightest touch.

"I want to get along with the pretty girl who returned to Earth. If you're worried about your amnesia, I will listen to your complaints too. Today was to prepare for that."

Crossing such event (falling deeper) will pull the distance between the two hearts closer.

Heheheh, this is indeed the suspension bridge effect.[91]

Jokingly carry out the test would only result in actually falling from the bridge.

Who would blush from an ending like that?!

… Fine, I give up on any benefits. Let's put an end to this!

To crawl back onto land, and let gravity torture me.

"To get along, we have to understand each other first. In short, self-introduction is vital!"

"Ah… I'm Tou...wa..."

Hey, slow down. I'm not done yet.

Helplessly, I gave the screen time to Erio. Perhaps a bit shook up, she stuttered, unable to finish.

Since the tears flowing into her mouth were choking her, it seemed my lines won't be omitted.

Ok, then I'll say it!

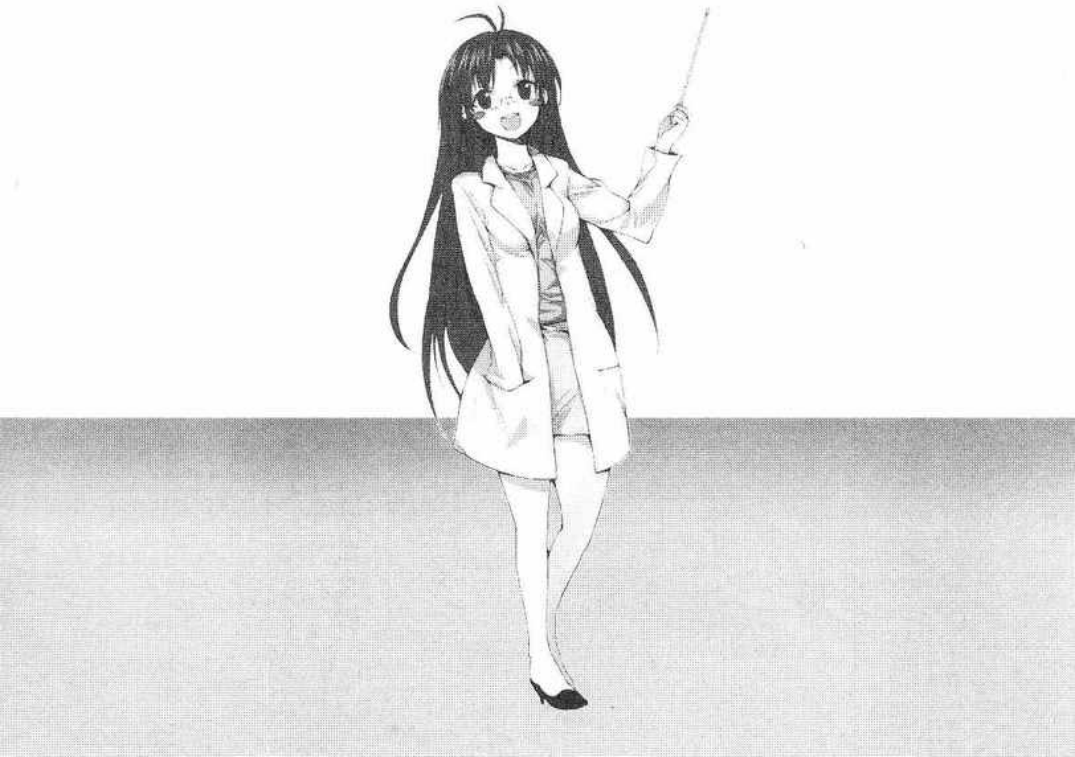
"Hey, Earthling. Give me your name."

"Touwa… Erio… Eri...o ...Touwa… Erio!"

“Good. I'm Niwa Makoto, pleased to meet you.”

● I Can not fly。 +5

現在の青春ポイント合計 +1



- I can not fly. +5

Youth-Point Total: +1

六章『都会の宇宙人』

Chapter Six - Aliens of the City

The price of five Youth-Point was hospitalization.

Holding onto the handlebars as we pounced the sea, my right arm was bent to a point where even Yoga masters would be shocked to see. The elbow that took the hit snapped in half.

And it wasn't a simple fracture: apparently I wasted so much of my daily calcium supply that the bone wouldn't heal.

After what happened, we had serious trouble just getting back to the shore. Amazing how neither Erio nor I drowned. Half way home, my elbow hurt so much that I was on the verge of breaking down in tear. This was my first time experiencing such intense yet joyless sea bath. What can I say – the sea of spring was colder than I imagined. Because of the lack of kindness and calcium, I think I should have eaten the fishes swimming around and ate some Paracetamol from ten years ago to replenish the lost nutrition.[92]

Like a fish or shrimp before being fried, I was covered in sand after climbing onto the man-made beach. Clothes drenched with sea water weighted me down, and the way back could be summarized as 'horrible.' Gravity's counter attack dominated me.

The bicycle was, naturally, gone in the sea. In the turbid water, the shadow of a bike that went the opposite direction of space bobbed. If the local residents saw it, I bet we'll be reprimanded for illegal dumping.

"….."

Thus, I lost my means of transport. The straw of hope Erio gripped onto slid away.

…Was there a point? Rather than a query, it was more of a feeling of self-reflection that swayed in my heart.

Just like for evil adults who divulged the truth when it should have been a part of a growing for kids to realize the nonexistence of Santa Claus, the ephemeral thrill was ensued by bitterness and self-questions that I could not answer.

The Erio who fell from the basket earlier into the sea than either the bicycle or me was unhurt. Nevertheless, she cried. I don't know if they were the tears of fear, despair or physiology; I merely held her hand.

While thinking about the annoying taste of water in my mouth, I clenched my jaw, dragging my right arm and Erio to somewhere where we can call for an ambulance. While trotting, I didn't have the strength to take care of the bangs covering my eyes; the only thing repeating in my murky head was 'haircut next weekend.' Incessantly, I meditated 'barber, barber, barber, and then a hair salon.' Like the eighth channel back home, the paper that is my heart was imbrued black. I probably wasn't thinking then, but rather moved on mechanical autopilot.

Otherwise I would have talked more with Erio, using more words weaved with encouragement, censure, love and hate.

Ever since our landing, I had been silent, eventually letting go of even her hand.

My hospitalized life ended after two weeks, and I went home with an arm in support and cast. Golden week ended already, marking the beginning of a world reeking with the May Disease [93]. Even I was infected by the air, occasionally hanging my head and eyelids.

There's still Erio and Meme-san back home. Even if the direction is different, the effort of dealing with this pair of mother and daughter was definitely not lacking.

Ah~ My arm itches. I wish I could just not give a damn and scratch it.

As I stepped out of the hospital, the illusion of pressure change overwhelmed me; as if quickly pulled out of the sea, I almost passed out on the street. Paper bag filled with clothes rustled; substituting the cries of cicada, and knocked on my eardrums.

The heat unperceivable in the hospital dazed me.

I walked toward the Taxi stand while flicking my since-then longer bangs upward.

Give me some happy memories — give me some energy for today! I ruminated, finding more nutrition than one. Awesome.

… Oh yeah, Ryuushi-san and Maekawa-san visited me when I was hospitalized!

Though I walked on a rope thinner than the weaker-than-expectation piano wire, perhaps the flag I planted for them exists still.

Erio, however, never came.

“Mornin', Mako-kun!”

I went into full alert, thinking it was the attack of Meme-san.

Ryuushi-san stared, wide-eyed. Just finished with school, she wore the school uniform, with her pack, helmet and a large enveloped under her arms. Her hair may be flatten by the helmet, but the devil of adorableness was alive and well.

Perhaps this way suits her better (spoken with vehemence).

“Oops, was that too friendly?”

Close the door first, then apprehensively poke the dying dude on the street to see if he's alive. Ryuushi-san seemed to visit me with the same cautiousness.

“Nope, perfectly O.K.” If that someone was a certain aunt, I will shout, 'don't call me that.' People are realistic like this. Since I am in middle of a rebellious phase, it is my obligation to reject my guardians. I explained to myself.

“Oh! S'that so?”

Swoosh! With a dexterous and exaggerated motion, Ryuushi-san opened her pack and put on a softcap with both hands. She messed with the edge of the hat, adjusting the angle. She sat down after filling the unfilled (please excuse my skill with words) hat. The way she put things on her knee and skirt was super cute.

Put me there too. No, I mean let me sit there too. Did my brain rust from drinking too much sea water?

“What's up? With the hat I mean.” In some way this counts as QBK.[94]

“Oh~ hahaha~” Ryuushi-san intentionally covered up with a boyish laughter; her level of embarrassment was just right. She pulled the hat down, just to the point where her eyes were hidden. She looked around bashfully:

“Cuz my hair's all messy. The wind went woosh, my helmet went squish, and the sweat went eeky. I tried to fix it in the hospital's rest room, but I can't get it all fluffy! I can't get it like bread!”

Ryuushi-san played with her shoulder-length, coffee-colored hair, as if defending the reason of her hat. Agh, dammit, I want to feel her swaying arms~ As I cordially looked at her, I suddenly realized.

Ryuushi-san's uniform had changed season, and she was now wearing summer outfit.

“Is it weird?” She grasped onto the hat, looking at me with upturned eyes. This devil of adorableness seems to have the innate ability to hit people’s bullseye. With her finger – not a needle – she poked into my heart.

“Not even! Girls look good in anything, it's amazing.”

“The hat fits me? This is a guy wear though!”

“It totally does. I almost thought you were a boy!”

“Wha! Really now~? Can I punch you?”

Ryuushi-san brandished her fists with a smile.

Her knuckles were round like a child, looking very soothing.

“Seriously, you are so cute.” I finally stopped hiding and said out loud.

Ryuushi-san's shoulder jumped; her hats almost flew off. “U-uwahh~! Wahh~!” Screeching like a monkey, she expressed her freak-out both inward and out.

Patients in the same room mostly gave me a 'what the hell?' and 'how annoying' look, but what do you people want me to do? Tell her to get in the bed? The argument is very enticing, but it's too early for a sexual harassment charge.

Just let me wish for a life of missed opportunity!

“I-I'm not that cute! N-not even close! I'm so plain that two guys rejected me during my first year!!” Your nervousness is giving away some personal information!

If I let Ryuushi-san be, she might divulge a few more secrets. However, she might end up reincarnating into a monkey and begin stampeding in the room like a chimp in the zoo. In the end, the festering carcass of his lover was carried to his arms… I hope things will never come to be like that, so I have to calm her down.

“Sorry, was that creepy?”

“Y-yeah! Super-duper creepy!”

“...My bad.” I thought she was going to say otherwise from the way our conversation was going, but the impact was unexpected.

How many years has it been since I've apologized like that?

Ryuushi-san seemed to have also realized the implication of her words; she waved her arms about and added in some intense denial:

"No, no! Not really! Yeah, ya aren't up close!"

"So I am from a distance away..." It might be better getting called trash.

"Awuwah~" Ryuushi-san dug her grave even deeper, probably already reaching the mantle. Her voice stopped abruptly as she hugged her hat and spun her head inside. I wanted to clap my hands to see how she'd react to the sound.

Finally recovered, she proposed with a charming visage that emitted warmth:

"May I start over?"

"You may."

"Then, cough cough!" Ryuushi-san made the sound without movement. It was kind of half-baked. "These are copies of my notes for classes — midterms are coming up!"

She picked up the brown envelope and fanned the air about.

"Wow, thanks!" I thanked her as I browsed through the notes inside. Though I didn't understand a word in the articles, just looking at those curly characters was enough to satisfy me.

If this were Meme-san's note, I'd only cower at the undecipherable writing and use it to test my grip strength.

"If there's anything ya don't get, just send me a text. Well, I'm not the smartest, so I'm not exactly the most reliable."

"Not at all, you are my only support, sensei!" I jokingly spoke, concluding with a little banter.

As the laughter fade, her face changed.

Ryuushi-san placed her fists on her knees, finally asking the real question toward the bed. Her voice was very slight, as if the words were made of sand:

"So..."

"Hm?"

Her hesitant eyes and lips moved up and down. Ryuushi-san was looking for a way to peek into my heart.

"Hm?" I don't like burden, so I gave her the chance to keep speaking.

Perhaps effective, the question that led Ryuushi-san hesitant quickly

appeared onstage.

"Were you planning to kill yourself when you jumped into the sea?"

Ah, I see. So she heard about what I did.

"Nah, that wasn't the intention." I denied there and then, leaving no room for misunderstanding.

At that time I pedaled to soar in the blue sky for my own survival.

My goal wasn't anything as grand as space, but I sure gave it my all.

"You might not know yet, Niwa-kun, but a while ago, there was someone who did exactly what you did. She started spouting nonsense because she got hurt… I'm super worried!"

"Hm… Sorry for making you worry." Cough cough, but I only did that because I was worried for the same girl!

Only if she learned her lessons in the second challenge.

"Since it was real scary near the end though, I did prepare to die."

"Don't die! Absolutely don't. Um, the person who's dying may not care, but the people left behind would definitely be sad. It's the worst if you take those sadness lightly because you can't see it."

"You're right. Ryuushi-san would be sad too."

"Of course! If Niwa-kun died, the entire school will cry."

"Hahah, more like no one will."

"No way~ I won't let ya make that kind of record!"

Ryuushi-san puffed her chest out confidently. She probably wasn't conscious of it, but for the person in question, hearing her assert like that kind of flustered me. Why did I have to be a high schooler who fears serious topics?

As long as it isn't an untrusting person, most people would asses Ryuushi-san as someone who doesn't hide her emotion.

But then again, it is entirely impossible to see the entirety of someone's heart.

The human heart is tantamount to the existence of aliens: the location of it unknown, and its depth abyssal.

Erio wrapped herself in futon, perhaps seeking at least equivalence in appearance, and tasted the fruits of defeat. She wanted to become an existence

of 'unknown.'

Though her blockheaded cousin proved to her that she was a city girl of pure Earthling genes.

“Oh yeah. Are you a cellphone enthusiast, Niwa-kun?”

“I don't advocate anything; I celebrate both Christmas and New Year. Wanna exchange number?”

“Lets!” Rustle rustle, Ryuushi-san took out a neon pink cellphone from her pocket. The power was off, probably because she's in a hospital.

“I don't have mine right now, could you write it down for me? I'll call you after I'm released.”

“Ok~” She took out her pencil pouch, and even mischievously pretended to roll her sleeves up.

Everything was so smooth, it's great. The level of smoothness of conversations between me and Erio didn’t even come close to a hamster wheel. But those memories seem to have been purified by the sea.

I recalled the endless horizon when I flew with Erio; I looked up.

“…...” I saw something at the entrance.

My melodrama was cut before it ended. Even the life of a dragonfly lasts longer than you!

A natural malice with no intention to visit struck.

“Transfer student, feeling bored?”

Maekawa-san, a uniform enthusiast, used coming to hospital as an excuse to dress up as an eggplant. I definitely didn't mistype nurse (ナース) with eggplant (ナス), the indigenous Indian fruit belong in the Solanum genus.

“Yo!” From the stem of the purple costume, she greeted with arms that penetrated the fruit.

For me and Ryuushi-san, time indeed stopped for two seconds; the patients sharing room with me also turned into unseasonal icicles.

The clear sky deeply embraced us… I attempted to escape with a scenery description, switching the entire background. I take back what I said earlier. There are things girls can't wear. If the person changes into something else, I'm not going to help making more excuses.

Because of the lack of reaction, Maekawa-san (or eggplant) tilted her head:

“Huh… Not funny? I chose nurse and eggplant because we're in a hospital...”

“Please don't explain the joke.”

The sea of spring already lowered my body temperature. If forced to listened to anymore of this, the audience, I, may end up cringing with cheeks burnt: having someone explaining an unfunny joke humiliates even me.

This onee-sama failed to realize the plunging of her authority. Not even — Maekawa-san herself looked really satisfied. Speaking of purple mascot, isn't there one in McD*nald's?

“This was a costume for a part time job I had. The manager gave it to me when the store closed down.”

I wanted to lock Nasu-san into a cupboard. You actually wore this all the way through the roads in the city, the hallway and the hospital? This isn't the Super N*ntendo Era: your equipment will reflect on the outside. I'll give you a piece of advice then: put your gallantry and valor away, and live an earnest life with normal clothes!

“So Maekawa-san is this kind of person...”

Ryuushi-san shot a rigid glance. As her body recovered from frigidness, she spoke with a pitying voice.

“Mhm.” Maekawa-san, who is in many way off the rail, was unwavered, and proudly nodded.

“So I suppose you're here to visit Niwa-kun?” Eh? Ryuushi-san looked scary.

“Why else would I be here?” Maekawa-san was also scary in a different way.

My social circle doesn't cover eggplant's who'd pay me a visit.

An eggplant she may be, Maekawa-san is still a girl. The other person may be a girl, but is also Ryuushi-san. To be honest, I haven't done any good deeds today, yet there were two girls who paid me a sick visit. Rather than joy, I felt uneasiness. Am I going to die soon?

“Hmph~ Since when are ya so chummy~? You don't even~talk~in~class~”

Oh boy, Ryuushi-san… is she jealous? No way! But she sure is observant of what Maekawa-san and I are like in class.

I'm not going to be overly self-conscious: it might cause some damage for

both parties later~

In contrast to my enlightenment, Maekawa-san turned into an idiot.

“Because the transfer student and I spent a night together.”

“ 'Hah?' “ Maekawa-san successfully froze time again. Especially for Ryuushi-san, who seemed to have lost much to the thief of time.

She even forgot to blink, like someone else was wearing a Ryuushi-san costume.

“Hold on, jokes like this could ruin my name–”

“Guuwah~!” Look at what you've done!

Perhaps the recoil from the earlier pause, Ryuushi-san's time accelerated all of the sudden. Blood boiling on her face imbued her cheeks and eyes; if a pulse were taken from her delicate wrist, the doctor would probably mistakenly say 'are you suicidal?'

“A night is an evening! Pitch black!”

No, uh, really — night in the city isn't exactly pitch black unless specially made.

“I've been wronged — she made this up! I haven't had lessons that tempting yet!”

“What do ya mean tempting?!” Ryuushi-san went berserk to a point of no return.

“Dammit, Kibo-nengu! My school life is done thanks to you!”

“Oh, I was thinking that all the time we've met in the evening adds up to a night~”

“This isn't like lottery in a market! Don't combine them!”

The nightmare brought by the purple devil worn my spirit; their argument intensified as if they were on the opposite ends.

Me and Ryuushi-san were spitting alien by the latter half of the conversation.

Before I realized, the primary substance of the storm, Ryuushi-san, had already left. The only one left was the striking eggplant woman and a high schooler who's hospital life from now on will blamed for various things.

“Your boring and depraved hospital life had just been visited by a

refreshing wind!"

Maekawa-san summarized the entire event as if narrating for a nature travel program.

"You mean a storm? The local buildings and culture are gone."

"Didn't think Ryuushi was going to have that great of a reaction — your love meter is exploding."

"It isn't! And don't call me Ryuushi!"

The target of gossip quickly turned back into the room to deny the rumor, and then ran away again.

"Is she the transfer student's familiar?"

"I don't even know the number of her summoning medium..." Because of a certain eggplant's meddling, I didn't get it.

"You guy see each other every day anyway, do you even need it? Alright, time for me to take this costume off. It's too hot."

As if the cousin of a Gibbons ape, Maekawa-san deftly unzipped the zipper on her back. The eggplant shed. The nurse was inside! Only if the development was so sweet. Since I didn't tell anyone, I won't commemorate it as some memorial day. The Maekawa-san on this inside didn't transform, donned in normal uniform.

"As expected, you're better as a uniform cosplayer."

"This isn't cosplay — it's my profession."

She lazily say on the folding chair and crossed her long legs. Seriously, her legs were so long, it wouldn't be surprising if her ancestors were wooden horse craftsmen. It's also surprising how my brain thought of something like this.

"Transfer student, I heard you jumped into the sea? Planning on reincarnating into a member of the fish?"

With a teasing tone, Maekawa-san asked me the question.

"Man, I planned on flying to the sky, but I fell because of the shortage of momentum."

"What, so you wanted to be a bird?"

"...I aimed to fly higher than a bird though."

At least Erio wanted to go through the atmosphere. I think.

“Hmph.” Maekawa-san swapped legs. She seemed to have seen something on me, and hunched forward with a slightly different expression. Sensing that she's attempting to see through my mind, I felt anxious.

“Tell Touwa this for me: next time I'll lend her a costume of the Greys to dress up with me.”

“...Was it that obvious?”

“Who knows?”

“Roger. I'll tell her after I'm released.”

Erio probably won't visit. Though the reason of my judgment wasn't easy to say, Maekawa-san noticed the overtones.

“She didn't make it to space? I guess Touwa doesn't qualify to be an alien!”

“Of course not.”

Human progress would have stalled three hundred years ago if they could fly into space with such low cost and low effort equipment. We gambled with our lives on the scale, and managed to get a few seconds of fly-and-float experience.

She straightened her back, her jeering lips tilted at a different angle.

“Oh, on an unrelated note, let’s go to the beach this summer!”

“That is really unrelated, Nee-san.”

“You can see the gill and scales that are my fish-cosplay's charm points!”

“No, I don't care about fishes other than those in Judo outfit.”[95]

“Bam~!” Ryuushi-san, who still hadn't gone home, came back and tackled Maekawa-san.

Maekawa-san, who has the appearance of an oarfish and the innards of a minnow, was pushed by the diminutive Ryuushi-san. “Whoa!” She stumbled onto the bed. I guarded my right arm just in time, but couldn't move her out of the way; she beautifully fell on my knees.

“Uwee~!” Ryuushi-san squeaked out of either mimicry or a representation of anger, and stuck her arms underneath Maekawa-san, forcefully pulling her out from the bed and back to the chair.

Maekawa-san looked like a miniature surfboard model when she was being carried.

“What are you doing?” She might have said that, but Maekawa-san's satisfied smile betrayed her malice.

“Shoulder charge is now in season.”

Ryuushi-san omitted the abstractness of 'autumn of sports' and added hostility, advocating the new season's unique sight. “Beep, beep beep beep~” She even imitated the prelude of an intercom broadcast, acting out the overly-cordial sound effect:

“The beach is prohibited.”

“**Why**?”

Maekawa-san English pronunciation was extra crispy. Written in words, though, must be the about the same as mine.

“Cuz there are jellyfishes.”

“Huh? Jellyfish?”

“**Yes**~ Squishy~”

She curled her fingers, attempting to convey the sensation.

“By that you mean guys and girls can't… No, you mean *I* can't go with the transfer student.”

Maekawa-san comprehension seems to be rather high — she might even be able to translate the early Erio's Japanese!

Ryuushi-san raved in the hospital, completely lost her mind.

“It has nothing to do with him — it's about guys and girls going to the beach! It's scary and it’s inappropriate!”

“Then according to you, what about the transfer student? He's already gone past the level of going to the beach.”

Pretending to be innocent, Maekawa-san shifted focus to my fatal injury.

“You… You've done more shameless things (ハレンチック)?”

Her self-made word is only two kana’s away from romantic (ロマンチック), yet it's so much harder to use.

“What, don't you know? Transfer student is Touwa's cousin!”

Hey, didn't you promise that 'it's better to not say it'? See, Ryuushi-san froze for the third time.

Why are new problems being dug out when I could clearly see the ending?

...Oh well, because it isn't a lie, I won't deny anything. At Least *I* won't.

It couldn't be helped if I get ostracized for it.

Because all I did was told the truth.

Even if the truth isn't the right answer, it is the only acceptable ideal I have.

Like so, I destroyed Erio's delusion.

I had no plan for the afterward consultation to salvation, and I did what I did irresponsibly.

...I've already decided the course of action when I get home.

In more ways than one, I've made up my mind. Like an Enypniastes, I will expose not just my organs, but also the brain on the outside of my body. [96]

Let Ryuushi-san's home-made warmth evaporate the puddle of thoughts.

“By the way, I live with Erio.”

“ 'W-what~?!' “

Um, shouldn't one of you be aware of this?

☆

I reminisced, thinking that the process wasn't actually that interesting.

Since the memory was still fresh in its raw state, it probably wouldn't be glorified unless a year of two passes. Even if that happens, the likely thing to appear is probably a short story about 'why I hate eggplant.' I'm afraid that it wouldn't change my values.

Pondering about these thoughts, I returned to my second home on a shaky taxi through the river of life known as a road. Paying the tab with the remaining allowance I had, I left the car.

Like the first time I visited here on the last day of spring break, I looked around the entire house a distance away. There wasn't any sentiment of returning to a missed home.

It doesn't matter if it's this, that or whatever, everything depends on the coming days.

The story started here.

“...Alright, first episode's done. Please continue onto the second episode.”

Just a side note: my vision will extend to the eighty seventh episode. Every day is like birthday.

I lightly pushed the entry door (Not like it matters, but every time I opened this door, I thought of a certain sea-food restaurant in Setagaya.[97]

“I'm home~” A quiet greeting.

In just a second, Erio would frantically run down from the second floor to greet me, saying, 'welcome home, Mako-kun!' with a grin. And then I would proceed to be scared senseless and mouth agape. However, the Touwa family wouldn't have such antiquated and idealistic environment. I indeed felt a nostalgically cold air.

“...Hm?”

At the entrance, paper memo and paperweight were playing again. It would appear that they have assumed that all they needed to greet me, who was missing for three weeks, with was something that isn't even alive. A Zashiki Warashi[98] would do just fine!

I set the paper bag down, picking up the paper weight and memo with my left hand. The memo was filled with seven round and greasy characters: 'welcome back, Makoto.' A rainbow: she especially used a different marker for each character, making the end product look like a cheap neon sign for a pachinko parlour. For some reason, the purple-colored 'Makoto' was especially grotesque and thick. I focused, looking for the reason… I see. [99]

Looks like an experiment was carried out here — red and blue were mixed to see if the outcome was purple, and the charred product was forcefully covered with a purple marker. If Meme-san weren't the one who left this message, I honestly might have thought that it was cute.

While thinking about how to deal with this one-time grip-strength testing device, I took off my shoes. “Hah??” One step into the house, I discovered the walls of the hallway and even the floor was densely covered with memos. As if telegraph, it seemed like a circuitous way of communication. I picked up a piece next to my hand.

'The snack in the cabinet should be expired.'

“Save it before it's gone!” Are you the devil? The enemy of Engel's Coefficient. [100]

Also, the contents were too reflective of a certain Isono family. We don't even have enough people.

“Uh, if I crowbar it, I'd be Masuo — no, Katsuo. Erio'd be Sazae… Wakame. Meme-san is Fune...” Actually, screw this! The future would be bleak if I set our characters here! Even I reached the same conclusion. [101]

I got annoyed when I read the second message, so I ripped off and crumpled each one of them afterward. The simple task quickened; my footstep also lightened.

Destroy everything altogether using this opportunity! I followed the guidance of the notes all the way to the kitchen. The one on the basket seemed to be the last.

I glanced at it, so when Meme-san asks me how I thought about it, I could give her a complete answer. Like a book report for summer homework, all you need is the first half of the book to begin writing.

'There's a cake to celebrate your homecoming. It's almost expired, so eat it quick.'

“Now there's something useful.”

I only listen to useful information.

I opened the fridge.

There was Meme-san.

“Eeeeck!” With no shame or pretense that no one heard, I screamed as if I received the Horror News and hopped backward. Paralyzed on my butt, I scoop back and bumped my right arm countless times onto the cabinet. But mental (fear) problems superseded bodily (pain) ones, rendering me mindless of it.[102]

With knees bent, Meme-san was stuffed in the fridge in a fetal position, head tilted sharply to the right. Her eyes were rolled back, and her tongue out.

E-Erio? Was it Erio? **Are you U.N. Owen**? [103]

Why did it turn into a mystery in the end? Are you sick of writing RomCom? Bastard.

Is the second volume going to start with an accidental push down a flight of stairs, then finding out that the refrigerator is already occupied with another body when dumping the corpse?

“Makoto...”

She’s alive! Eh, is she? It’s raw, but it’s alive!

But I don't want to be near her! My legs are shaking!

"It…is…cold…"

"Ah…Um, yes… Eh, uh… Ah, yes!" Finally mustering the strength to lift my ass up, I stumbled toward the fridge, threw the paper bag away and held the sides of the fridge.

"Are… Are you all… right?" I shudderingly felt her right hand.

…Hm?

"I'm freezing to death, Mako-kun. Warm me with your skin…"

"……" A current went through my body.

I closed the door and backed off for a moment.

"……" I tried knocking.

"……"

"Come in~" The answer sounded warm. Hah?

"Dammit!" I busted the door open. I realized that this was a wasteful deed to a society that advocates saving energy — at least someone *outside* of the fridge did!

"You're so cold, Mako-kun~" Please don't wave your brown irises around like a girl in love: I'll want to stab them.

"It's not like the thought of hanging myself went through my head… I'd rather not ask, but what are you doing?"

"Chilling."

"Don't expect that to work every time."

"Ahahah! Heave! Ho! Hnng!"

Meme-san struggled, holding on to the side of the fridge. With her own strength, she escaped and crashed onto the floor.

The entire process was like a new version of the R*ng. [104]

"Eheheh~" Meme-san stood, sticking out her tongue while messaging her neck.

"Ah~ My neck hurts (☆)"

"Just become a star then." Or rather, bring me to space or a paradise where you don't exist.

"Please don't be like me, good children everywhere!"

"The existence of this person is fictional."

Or rather part of my crude delusion. Alright, it's about time to put a period to this story.

"Mako-kun, where are you going? There's a lost lamb in need of warmth here."

"You'll live. Not like you're a cold-blooded animal."

"But I spent five minutes crawling in there~ You're so cold, Mako-kun."

You are the cold one here. Stop rubbing my arm, your fingers are cold.

"Basically, don't you have work today?"

"I'm off today."

"Speaking of which, what do you do?"

"It's – a – secret!"

"……" I would have socked you if you're a guy.

"More importantly, you should worry about how the fridge was empty enough to fit me in there."

"Your head is empty enough to fit fifty hobbits in there, how breath taking."

And those hobbits are building an empire there!

"You must be malnourished if you're so easily angered!"

"I *thought* I should have taken more calcium. Man, why do I have to have an irritating person doing whatever the hell she wants within my fifty cm radius?"

"Or is it because you can't let out your frustration in a place full of people?

"You can pretend it's Amano-Iwato if you want, just go back to the fridge."[105]

"By the way, next up is the cake! But it's made by someone else!"

The refrigerator opened once again; the frigid air oozed out depressingly.

"Oops, sorry. Your aunt accidentally crushed the cake." She showed me the pulverized blue box.

"It's ok. My feeling of appreciation was also crushed."

Enough. Let it end, roll the credit.

It's ok if that's also crushed.

I gave up completely. Well, about half of it was to hide my embarrassment.

Actually, I was worried at first that maybe Erio murdered her mother.

"Alright~ Let's celebrate Mako-kun's release from jail~"

"Hospital, you mean."

"Yes, yes, the hospital. Why don't we go out for lunch? What I mean is to eat at a nearby diner!" There were flowers around Meme-san. [106]

She's probably planning on buying some drinks — drinks that look like gasoline.

"Go get Erio, she's upstairs."

As if nothing happened, Meme-san spoke with no hint of awkwardness.

"Me?"

She flashed a calm and magnanimous smile that befitted her age.

"This is your job in the house, Mako-kun."

"Huh…" This was my first time overwhelmed by a benevolent feeling.

My right foot was stuck on the ground; I wanted to shake the goosebumps off.

The rate at which her brain solidifies astounded me.

Her smile crossed the boundary of observable plane, illuminating the world with love.

If Meme-san was at least a decade younger, I would have fallen for her.

As expected of a character going for gap-moe: she will say acute lines occasionally at a miraculous probability.

I can't even believe that the brain of the person who just crawled out from the fridge earlier was connected to the lips that just said those words!

"But why not have you do it sometimes? Since you're usually so indifferent toward Erio."

"My, what do you mean usually? Before Mako-kun came here, our life was pretty normal!"

Hoh~ Normal, you say? I shot a glance of suspicion. Normal days with a

blanket is just sleeping together, isn't it?

"I'm only apathetic toward Erio, because I knew Mako-kun will be her friend, and do things for her. Everything is going according to my plan." [107]

…Even a thumbs up. Are you for real? No, you are really cold on a physical level.

"I understand. I'm going now."

There were two rooms and a resident upstairs. But starting today, there will be two people again.

I discovered something after coming back from two weeks of absence.

The smell of this house was the smell of Erio.

It was neither sweet nor stimulating.

Yet, that comforting smell provided a serenity that permeates the entire body.

I peered into her room.

"Eri-"

"…"

The tongue halfway through greeting paused.

She was wrapped in futon. Except this time everywhere else besides the toes was hidden.

What the hell is up wrong this caterpillar?

I saw the sign of her poor direction of growth.

From the bottom of my belly, let's say it out loud!

"…I'm home!"

"…!" Erio jumped. Ugh, legs grew out from the futon.

She stood up, hunched forward, and escaped to the corner of the room.

Is she a hermit crab? Or maybe a croissant-disguising worm that grew limbs.

Agh, gross. Deep-sea animals may be disgustingly cute, insects are just too disgusting for me to admire.

"It…It's here!"

"I'm not some freak. You should come out though." From the futon.

Erio knelt on the floor, and poked her head out from the futon. The shape was like a bowling pin, making me want to tip her over.

"… How's your hand?"

"The itch is killing me, but everything else is fine."

Also, it hurt like hell when I knocked the cabinet earlier when your mom freaked me out.

"Sorry."

Decent behavior. Acceptable. But I still wanted to laugh because of her futon.

Erio's Japanese vocabulary may have been reduce… Yet, her communication skills are normal now.

"I'll introduce myself again."

"Hm?"

"I'm Touwa Erio, sixteen. My profession is… housework assistant."

"Must be nice being a girl, having a backup like that."

Guys would have to deal with it head-on.

"The cousin is back." Though facing down, she stared at me.

"Mhm. Meme-san says we're going out to eat, so I'm here get you."

"Mm." Silence after raving. What a bipolar tongue.

"Take the futon off."

"…Mm." She hung her head somewhat regretfully. Why?

I looked closer, finding out that the pattern on the futon was a flower never seen before. Calamus blooming in purple, and the sheet was also as fluffy as a croquet- no, a grilled mochi.

Was this the fruit of her hard work? Am I popular now?

Where do kids in the city pick up their fashion sense? Magazine kapok?

Erio pulled herself out from top of the futon-roll. Leaving the futon that was shed like a snake skin, she stepped onto the room's floor.

Why are the things this pair of mom and daughter do so realistic in a bad way?

She stood to flatten the folds on her dress. There wasn't a speck of awkwardness on her brilliant expression, completely natural.

"Do aliens really not exist?" Erio eyed the telescope, and muttered dejectedly.

"Who know? The only thing I proved was that you are my cousin, a hikkikomori who helps out at home."

"I seem to be treated as useless…"

"Don't mind it." I'll feed you! "No way!"

"Hm?"

"No, seriously, don't mind it."

I rolled my shoulder, glossing over the topic. I almost blurt out promises I can't keep!

"Ah… Mm."

"Mm…" Since standing around was difficult for both of us, we tossed out courtesy smile to each other.

There was a mysterious emptiness in the air. The only thing left was to walk to the entrance.

But other than vocational reasons, I also had some private matters with her.

"Um…"

I stopped half way; I scratched the back of my head, giving the push the words in my mouth need. The words were practically squeezed out!

"Yes?"

"Sorry. For ruining your dream."

I had already decided in the hospital that I would apologize to Erio first thing getting home.

"…?"

"If you were serious and accepting of it too, then I was probably just being nosy."

I turned toward the map of town. Precisely, to avoid facing her.

Even if her direction was wrong, she was neither lost nor anxious. With some compromise, she might even live on. Erio's goal didn't need to be censured.

But that's because you weren't broken.

Because you could still come back.

I destroyed your delusion.

"It's ok. The cousin must be right."

With a subtle expression, Erio walked on the rope between consent and dissent.

She could not see me, who could only destroy, as a figure of complete agreement or denial.

However, she spoke on:

"Amnesia is scary…"

She paused for a moment, and then lifted her head up as if finished with recalling:

"Thanks to the cousin, I flew for a second. It felt great."

A smile like the clear sky of May appeared on Erio's face.

Particles on her strands of hair were completely revitalized. Dazed, I could not look straight at her face.

"So, this is my thanks."

I reflexively received the object when her hand reached over.

It's an underwear.

I threw it on the floor.

Actually, I wanted to toss it upward, but having something like that fall my head is mortification beyond a lifetime. I held my impulse.

"What are you doing?"

"What the hell are *you* doing? Are you still nuts?"

"Because the cousin requested girl's panties from mom before."

"Wha-!"

I planted a flag this serious at that time?! You heard *that*? Are you a moron?!

"Can't you tell if something sarcastic?"

"It was prepared after considerable contemplation."

I smacked Erio on the top of her head. I'm going to sue both of you for slander!

Man, honestly! The serious atmosphere dissipated, the only thing left was a vexing tumor.

"Anyhow!"

"Mm."

"About your lost memory, I'm sorry that I can't help much."

I forced the dialogue back to seriousness.

"It's fine, I can deal with it myself — it's the only thing I can do."

Erio shut her eyes, a faint smile on her face as she led the way out.

Even without sight, she seemed to know the entirety of the house. She correctly turned to where I was and jokingly said:

"Only if I didn't leave school."

"I think so too — It would have helped with finding a job."

"No, not that." Erio shook her head, emitting particles.

With a layer of that stuff, even hallways in normal houses would become rice with gold dust.

Not that it's anything worth being happy about!

"Because going to school with the cousin seems to be fun."

…Cough!

While going down stair with her, I thought about the tiny possibility of that happening.

On the moment of that day when we flew.

If the bike didn't accelerate when it did, we wouldn't have enough force to fly and might end up running off the cliff, becoming 'two high school students mysterious fell to death.'

How come the bicycle regained its performance at the end?

It would make sense, saying that it's all a coincidence.

…However, where are the aliens?

Before solving this doubt, this question is still meaningful and valued.

Touwa Erio is an Earthling. She isn't a cyborg either, just lost a bit of her memory.

Perhaps, she really is favored by the aliens watching over this city.

With her car parked outside, Meme-san ambushed us just outside of the house.

Of course, it isn't a vehicle as wasteful and convenient as a car. It's a city bike, or colloquially known as a utility bike

"You're slow~ why didn't you come out earlier if you knew the sun was so hot~ Hurry~"

In just a short time, she impeccably fixed even her makeup.

"Don't tell me — are we all riding on this?"

I said so, knowing that there is no other way. The thought of giving up flashed.

"No problem. You aunt is *driver paper*. This is a piece of cake." [108]

"I have no clue whatsoever on what you're talking about." Is Meme-san's

brain ruined by the heat or the frigidity?

"Who's pedaling?" With proper Japanese, Erio joined the conversation. Not particularly worked up, Meme-san answered naturally:

"Of course Mako-kun is! Also, I'm sitting in the back. Wow~ the smell of love!"

"Must be rotting or something, cuz ripe fruits are sweet." And 'Mako-kun' seemed to have become my fixed name. [109]

Even though I'm injured, there is no problem if it's just riding a bike.

"Where is Erio sitting?"

"Here." The two pointed at the same place simultaneously. Naturally, it was Erio's special basket.

"This isn't some circus act…"

…Well, whatever.

Erio jumped into the basket to become its load. Meme-san sat in the back, her arms circling my waist.

"Please don't hug me."

"How much, in percentage, in that phrase was 'tsun?'[110]

"Measured in inches instead of percentage, about three inches."

"What about for me?"

"About five centimeter per second." [111]

I stepped on the pedal, each cycle onerous.

Rather than being pedaled, the bike slid downhill on its own.

Finally, the wheels wobbled precariously forward.

The four-man five-legged race including a bike never escaped the speed of 'slack.'

"Gravity should go to hell!"

"Agreed."

The bicycle will not be soaring in the sky today.

Carrying passengers who weren't aliens, it went to a place somewhere on Earth.

Afterword

The person who wrote this book is someone who could easily say, 'I didn't win the prize, so why the hell would I join the award ceremony!”. An envious person who refuses to admit defeat, who makes up for what he lacks with pure motivation — a terrible person. I say that, but I actually did win a prize. The dispute I had at the final examination was a past long gone.

The reward I won was called the first '直o賞.' (Nao*Shyou) There's no way the word in the middle was 木 (ki). During a conversation, if I vaguely bring up 'yea, I actually got the 直。。。賞!' the effect is quite amazing. As a side note, my chief editor's name is 小山直子 (Koyama Naoko).

Man, what a surprise.

Aside from that, this book's outline was, without the empty lines, about four lines long — the blank was astounding. I wanted to walk from the east exit of Shinjuku station to the south exit, yet I got all the way to Yoyogi station. Even until now, I still can't type without looking at the keyboard. A lot of things happened too, like doodling on the white board in the editorial department, but the book was published safely. This is all thanks to the help of many people around me, and the readers.

To be honest, I didn't think I could be an author for so long.

Because there wasn't any idea for afterwords, I've preemptively set the next volume's to be a short, single paged story — if there is a next book!

My greatest thanks to the two editors who gave it their all for the production of this book. Being able to bring this perilously written book out into the stores so quickly, my biggest thanks to you.

I've only seen the rough sketches of ブリキ先生(Buriki), who provided the illustrations of my work this time, but I believe sensei will definitely deliver beautiful pictures that will raise the book's interest when displayed in store.

Also, to a certain fifty three year-old person who bragged 'I know everything!' only to ask 'what is that?' two seconds later, and my mother, who I will not make comments here about, my appreciation. I still haven't heard anything from 水彦先生, who once made fun of me saying 'if you can be a writer, then I can live with gillls!'. I'm a bit worried; I am eagerly waiting to see you walk under the blue sky energetically with gills.

Finally, not just to the people who first read this book, or the readers who have supported me all this time, I give the greatest thanks to all viewers of this

work. Thank you.

Hitoma Iruma 人間入間

Translator's notes and references

1. Jump up ↑ Refers to the Japanese National High School Baseball Championship held annually in the Koshien district of Nishinomiya City, Hyogo.
2. Jump up ↑ I found that this is a euphemistic term for something, but I think it's literal here...
3. Jump up ↑ Refers to a type of game in which the player takes on the role of a character, usually in a school setting, with access to different heroines/heroes with whom the player can engage in relationships
4. Jump up ↑ Organ in the inner ear that controls balances
5. Jump up ↑ Basically a train that runs on electric motors
6. Jump up ↑ A type of seafood consisting of mashed white fish formed into loaves and cooked. Quite delicious, by the way
7. Jump up ↑ Yakult is a probiotic dairy product made by fermenting skimmed milk with a type of bacterium – a very popular drink world-wide. According to the original translator, the company has direct delivery to houses, which is what these ladies are
8. Jump up ↑ A reference to the 1898 SF novel Edison's Conquest of Mars, which was about a scientist, coincidentally named Thomas Edison, in the time of a Martian invasion. Secondly, Niwa Makoto is written as 丹羽真, which can be pronounced in several ways, like Tana Shin
9. Jump up ↑ A shoulder inflammation causing chronic pain. People above forty are usually at risk
10. Jump up ↑ Similar to Makoto's name pronunciation; though I believe this is a reference to the manga/anime series "Jojo's Bizarre Adventure".
11. Jump up ↑ Magazine Mystery Reportage, a mystery oriented manga series regarding the supernatural and conspiracies
12. Jump up ↑ A tube-like food made from fish paste
13. Jump up ↑ In otaku culture, used to ascribe a form of passion for something
14. Jump up ↑ Iconic Japanese pro-wrestler during the 50's
15. Jump up ↑ Proposal has the same pronunciation as bulb of a plant in Japanese
16. Jump up ↑ Makoto in kanji is 真, which means truth
17. Jump up ↑ All bold text is spoken in English
18. Jump up ↑ A gadget from the manga Doraemon that allows for people with different language to communicate
19. Jump up ↑ Located in the front section of brain. Responsible for

restraining impulses and advanced planning)

20. Jump up ↑ Reference to Prince Shoutoku, who was purported to be able to listen to ten people at once and respond with the correct answers. His face was printed on the older 10,000 yen bills
21. Jump up ↑ With the "Beginning of 1900" earlier, this is a reference to the Nintendo game Mother released in 1989, which is about aliens; also known as EarthBound in US)
22. Jump up ↑ Japanese TV producer and super natural investigator
23. Jump up ↑ Fire refers to the manga Honou no Tenkousei, or Blazing Transfer student, by Kazuhiko Shimamoto. Mystery refers to Nazo no Tenousei, a light novel by Taku Mayumura
24. Jump up ↑ Ordering of the kana, which are characters for sound. Think Japanese alphabet.)
25. Jump up ↑ As the name suggests, house that can be taken apart and rebuilt easily
26. Jump up ↑ Ryuuko's name in Kanji is 流子. The second mentioning of her name was written as 龍虎, which literally means dragon tiger. In Japanese, the pronunciation of both is identical
27. Jump up ↑ Again, pronunciation pun here
28. Jump up ↑ Originally, the literal translation is "I began chasing Mifune-san's butt," which implies his focus…
29. Jump up ↑ A phrase that refers to discovering a person's S&M attribute. S being sadist, M being masochistic
30. Jump up ↑ Referring to "Torikagosou No Kyou Mo Nemutai Juunintachi" by Kabei Yukako. Torikagosou's kanji is written as 鳥籠荘, which looks similar to 烏龍, Oolong tea's kanji
31. Jump up ↑ Traditional Japanese wooden sandals
32. Jump up ↑ Rice ball
33. Jump up ↑ A microorganism
34. Jump up ↑ Crystal is fifteen years of marriage; golden fifty years
35. Jump up ↑ Refer to the word NEET – not in education, employment or training
36. Jump up ↑ Itasha 痛車— a car painted with anime or manga characters. Literally means 'pain car"
37. Jump up ↑ Referring to Taketori Monogatari, a classic Japanese literature, in which a bamboo-born woman ascended to the moon. Some say Kaguya-hime, the woman, is an alien
38. Jump up ↑ An era of Japan spanning from year 1336 to 1573. A time of chaos, but also of agricultural and industrial progress.
39. Jump up ↑ a Japanese pancake-like dish. Literally means "what you

like")

40. Jump up ↑ Supah sounds similar to Esupah
41. Jump up ↑ Yakisoba is basically stir-fried noodle. Bento is a takeout or home-packed meal with rice and a variety of sidedishes
42. Jump up ↑ Literally translates to "middle school second year syndrome."Refers to someone with delusion that usually involves super natural power or an alter persona
43. Jump up ↑ 大和魂, the spirit of Yamato. Refers to the traditional virtue and characteristics of Japan
44. Jump up ↑ A period of constant military conflict in Japan from 1467 to 1603. Ended when the Tokugawa shogunate unified Japan.
45. Jump up ↑ Youkan is a sort of jellied desert eaten in summer. Tempura refers to seafood or vegetables that are battered and deep fried.
46. Jump up ↑ 流子 could be pronounced as Ryuuko or Ryuushi. Ryuushi 粒子means particle
47. Jump up ↑ 深 海 誠 Shinka Makoto, a Japanese anime director and former graphic designer. Famous works include 5 centimeters Per Second and The Garden of Words. His last name literally means deep-sea
48. Jump up ↑ 深魚, deep fish
49. Jump up ↑ Different periods of time in Japanese History. Shouwa period is from 1926; Heiei began at the death of Emperor Shouwa, 1989, and is the current era
50. Jump up ↑ The ones you kick
51. Jump up ↑ Public Announcement
52. Jump up ↑ Something from Dragon Ball Z
53. Jump up ↑ The fire rises. I'm sorry
54. Jump up ↑ Something that supposedly alters fortune in Chinese culture. Usually refers to position of objects in houses
55. Jump up ↑ Daizu is soybean
56. Jump up ↑ Reference to Doraemon
57. Jump up ↑ A Youkai who blocks people's path from Japanese Folklore. They look like a wall with eyes and feet
58. Jump up ↑ A reference for those who unfortunately only use the US imperial system, 6 feet roughly equates to 182cm
59. Jump up ↑ Nisshin, a cup ramen company, is notorious for making hilarious commercials often involving aliens
60. Jump up ↑ キボネング-デコ is made of five Kanas. Yes, you can't spell Maekawa with them
61. Jump up ↑ Reference to the Dog of Flanders, possibly the 1975 anime adaptation. Specifically, the scene when the main character froze to death

with his dog in the church

62. Jump up ↑ Pretty sure he's talking about Dengeki Novel Taisho, which this book was probably submitted to as well
63. Jump up ↑ In Asian schools, each class eats lunch in their own class rooms. Students usually line up outside to get their lunch, and a few will be sort of the people who make sure the process is finished properly. It's been too long, so I don't remember exactly what they do
64. Jump up ↑ Planet of the Apes
65. Jump up ↑ El Chupacabra, the purported blood-sucking animal of Puerto Rico.
66. Jump up ↑ Walking without moving. I don't think there's an actual phrase for it in English that meant this action
67. Jump up ↑ Chemical that builds up quickly after extensive anaerobic exercise
68. Jump up ↑ Meiji Corp's brand of cone-shaped chocolate, meant to celebrate the landing on moon and imitate the shape of Apollo 11. The tip of it is pink
69. Jump up ↑ Again, pun with Ryuuko's name
70. Jump up ↑ ET reference
71. Jump up ↑ Japan Kanji Aptitude Test. Tests takers' knowledge of Kanji. Twelve levels in total, the test has descending level, meaning lower is better. Level three is the standard of a middle school graduate
72. Jump up ↑ 大凶, Great Misfortune, in romaji is Daikyou
73. Jump up ↑ Those of you who played Zelda should know… Bandits
74. Jump up ↑ 異星人 iseijin, aliens, sounds similar to 異性人 iseijin, people of different sex
75. Jump up ↑ Tradition Japanese toys that don't tip over
76. Jump up ↑ this guy breaks the fourth wall like no others
77. Jump up ↑ Myna is a bird
78. Jump up ↑ he's really mean to Meme-san
79. Jump up ↑ Meme-san was playing Shiritori, a game where one person says a word, the other, or others, would continue with a different word that begins with the same kana and ends with a different one. The game ends with ん
80. Jump up ↑ Japanese snack made of batter with octopus or tempura and various veggies. Often sprinkled with Katsuobushi and ponzu sauce. Tastes great btw
81. Jump up ↑ Referring to A Certain Level Zero Protagonist. As for primrose, it seems they grow best during cold season, and suffer when hot during spring or summer

82. Jump up ↑ These are all references to aliens sighting, likely to be related to the Roswell UFO incident
83. Jump up ↑ I am assuming the readers know what this is referring to
84. Jump up ↑ 自腹, literally 'self belly', means to use your own money. It's probably a visual pun on Seppuku, 切腹
85. Jump up ↑ there was a sighting of alien in the rainforest there
86. Jump up ↑ a classical story, where a person lied about his fear for manju's so he could eat them all
87. Jump up ↑ Za Warudo
88. Jump up ↑ a small island to the south of Fujisawa-shi, Kanagawa-ken
89. Jump up ↑ flag as in galge flags.
90. Jump up ↑ Pocky sticks
91. Jump up ↑ The phenomenon that the brain could misattribute different emotion to physical stimulation. E.G Anger to elevated heart rate from exercise. Look up misattribution of arousal and two factor theory
92. Jump up ↑ Common over-the-counter drug for pain relief and fever reduction. Commonly sold as Tylenol in US. Apparently in Japan, an old commercial slogan was "half of it is made of kindness."
93. Jump up ↑ a phenomenon that occurs in Japan after April when graduation and entrance exams are over. Since Golden Week is around the beginning of May, many experience a feeling of disappointment or unaccustomedness to a new phase to their lives.
94. Jump up ↑ 2006 FIFA, Japan vs Croatia. In the final, crucial moment of the match, Yanagisawa Atsushi missed the chance for a goal. His famous line afterward was 急にボールが来たので "because the ball suddenly came." QBK is an acronym of the phrase
95. Jump up ↑ Reference to the antagonists in Yoroshiku Kamen, which is a fictional show in the manga Sexy Commando Gaiden
96. Jump up ↑ a sea cucumber with translucent body
97. Jump up ↑ A special ward in Tokyo. Known for its good environment that resulted in it being one of the most populated wards
98. Jump up ↑ A sort of fairy in Japanese folklore that would play pranks on the home owners. They are known to be fortuitous and a sign of wealth
99. Jump up ↑ A form of arcade game usually for gambling purposes
100. Jump up ↑ The law that the percentage of income spent on food determines the wealth of a country. The lower the coefficient – lower percentage of income spent on food – indicates that a nation is wealthier
101. Jump up ↑ Reference to Sazae-san, a long running 4 panel manga. All

family members' names are related to sea animals

102. Jump up ↑ Kyofu Shinbun, News of Horror. Debut work of Tsunoda Jirou. The protagonist receives news of death or catastrophe, which if read will reduce his life by a hundred days
103. Jump up ↑ From Agatha Christie's 'And Then There Were None.' U.N. Owen was the mysterious killer's call sign
104. Jump up ↑ Originally Sadako, the name of the ghost. I figure this was easier to understand
105. Jump up ↑ The cave where Amaterasu, the Goddess of light in Japanese mythology, hid
106. Jump up ↑ Original text was missing, so I had to put something here
107. Jump up ↑ Maybe a reference to Death Notes
108. Jump up ↑ she swapped the phrase paper driver, perhaps meaning that she isn't heavy
109. Jump up ↑ Originally Meme-san said something along the line of 'sweet and sour.' Not sure what he's comeback is really saying though
110. Jump up ↑ As in tsundere's tsun
111. Jump up ↑ Reference to Shinkai Makoto's film Five Centimeter per Second. Interestingly, three inches is about 7.62 cm